

Naturopathic Treatment of Irritable Bowel Syndrome

BY KEVIN WILSON, ND, DAAPM

Naturopathic medicine embraces the concept that the body can heal itself by eliminating offending influences, supplying necessary nourishment and helpful medications, and implementing helpful psychological techniques. The naturopathic perspective on irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) differs from others only in that it is more eclectic, borrowing successful concepts, strategies, and agents from all disciplines. Naturopathic practitioners, like any other provider group, can be forced to rely on simple symptom management, because, despite all we know and learn, IBS can still evade true resolution.

The Naturopathic Approach to IBS

A central tenet of naturopathic medicine is that “all disease begins in the gut.” Every system of the body is negatively affected by gut dysfunction, which contributes to conditions as diverse as acne, allergy, anxiety, autism, depression, diabetes, neurological disorders, fatigue, hives, myalgia, rheumatological conditions, thyroiditis, and certain cancers. Conversely, dysfunction in other systems can manifest as bowel disorders.

Naturopathic physicians seek to address as many aspects as possible of the patient’s person and presentation. The naturopathic approach to IBS includes identifying and eliminating food allergens or irritants, particularly gluten (1,2); analyzing stool to identify possible pathogens, inflammation, and maldigestion; enhancing bowel ecology; augmenting digestive function and hormonal deficiencies; prescribing nutrient supplements for tissue and neurological repair; and providing emotional support to limit inappropriate stress responses.

Optimizing bowel flora is essential to IBS management. Many bacterial species assist digestion, inhibit adverse bacterial adhesion to the gut, and enhance cell-mediated immunity. Beneficial bacteria may reduce IBS pain by limiting the ability of non-beneficial organisms to produce gas and deconjugate bile acids, which may help control intraluminal water and electrolyte

transport (3). The most effective microorganisms for IBS relief—*Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *bifidobacterium* species—appear in diminished numbers in IBS patients’ bowels (4,5), and these organisms should be reintroduced. Gut ecology can be changed and optimized by providing prebiotics like fructooligosaccharides (FOS) and other soluble fibers (6). Cereal-based fibers can aggravate IBS, so patients should be encouraged to consume larger amounts of fruit and vegetable fibers (7).

Because of the high level of serotonin in the colon, the neurotransmitter must be managed aggressively in the gut. This requires specific serotonin reuptake transporters (SERT) and other less effective but more massive mechanisms of serotonin deactivation to maintain normal gut motility (8).

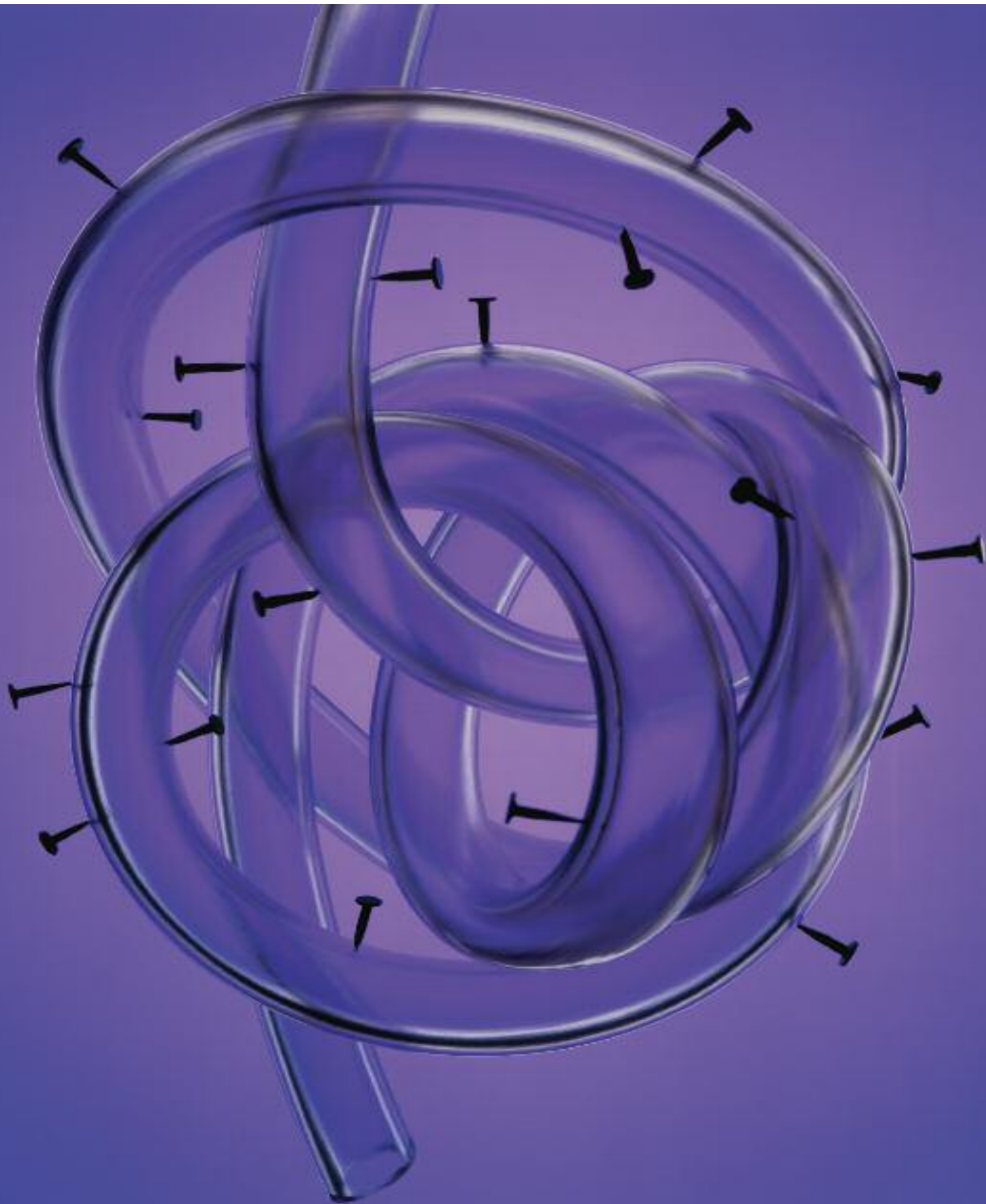
The 4R Program for Treating IBS

Luckaczer has encapsulated the key points of naturopathic care for IBS patients with his 4R program (9) designed to:

Remove pathogenic organisms, bacteria, yeasts, fungi, viruses, parasites, or offending foods from the diet, with or without immunological evidence of their antigenicity. Foods containing highly concentrated refined sugar should be eliminated since they slow gut peristalsis and cause atony of the duodenum and jejunum (9).

Replace deficiencies that affect bowel function. Hydrochloric acid, pancreatic enzymes, saccharidases, and other substances like bile salts are frequently reduced by stress, food allergen exposure, and nutrient deficiencies, particularly of zinc (10).

Reinoculate with beneficial organisms to relieve symptoms and improve bowel function by “place holding” to prevent pathogens from establishing a presence. Beneficial organisms also produce antimicrobial substances that inhibit a broad array of gram-positive and gram-negative pathogens (11).



Repair using nutritional factors that promote regeneration and healing of the gut mucosa, including glutamine, essential fatty acids, zinc, and pantothenic acid. Fish oils reduce

mucosal injury and inflammation (12). Glutamine is helpful in most cases of IBS, serving as fuel for the enterocytes and regulating gut barrier function, immunoinflammatory

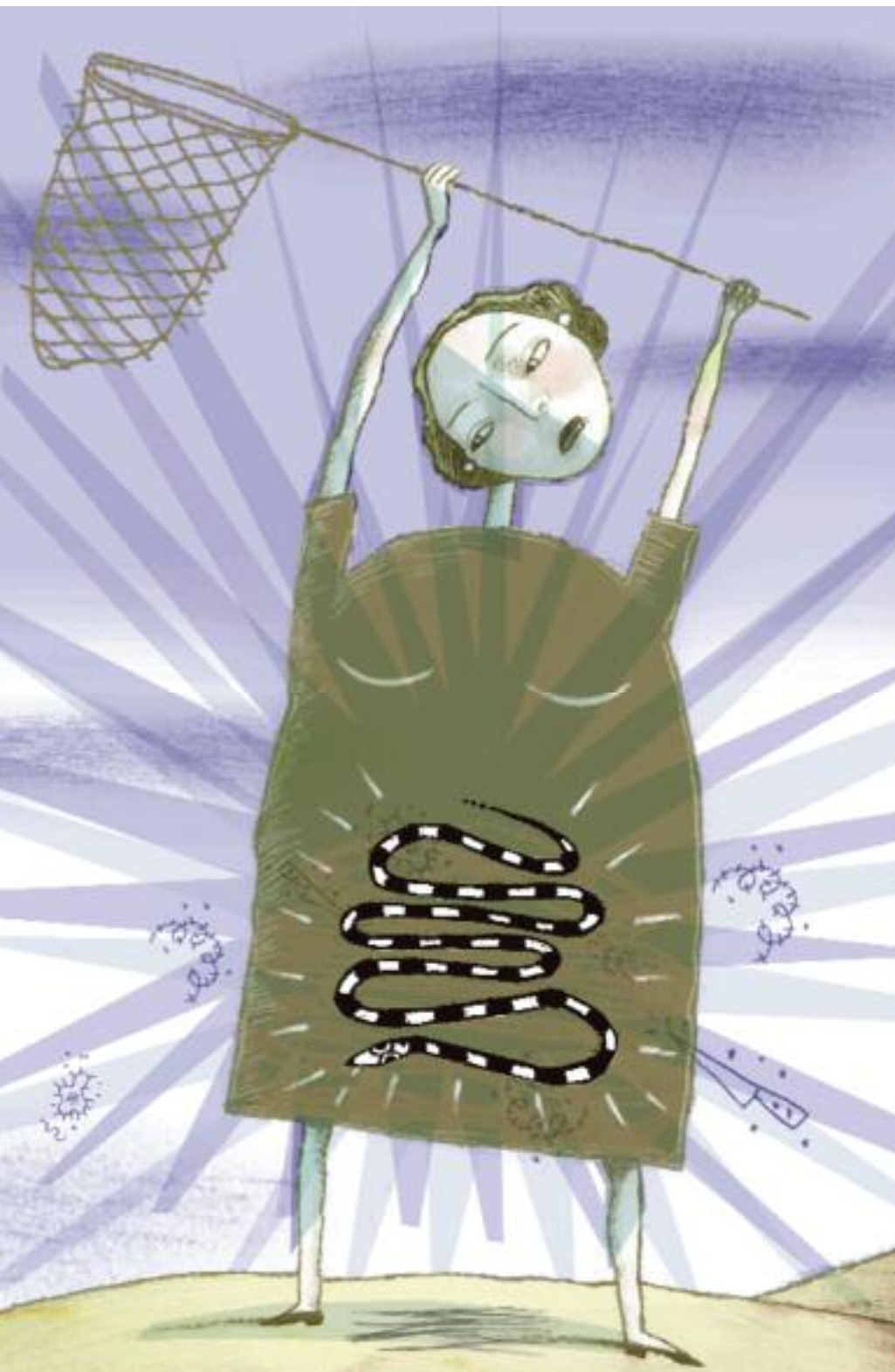
response, and gut antioxidant status (13). Glutamine may also help maintain intestinal musculature. It is safe, pleasant, inexpensive, and helpful in most cases of irritable bowel disease (IBD) and IBS. Individual nutrients including vitamin D and folic acid, and bioflavonoids like quercetin, can help optimize enteric mucosal integrity (14,15). Finally, the fermentation of dietary fiber helps increase intraluminal concentrations of short-chain fatty acids, such as butyrates, that supply energy to the colonocytes and preserve mucosal integrity and regeneration (14).

These 4 Rs represent a multipronged naturopathic plan for IBS relief and possibly true resolution (or at least symptom-free status) while minimizing the need for pharmacologic agents that may cause unwanted drug effects. However, some patients need greater assistance until these therapeutic benefits can manifest, and pain relief is often needed temporarily or occasionally.

Botanicals for Bowel Pain

Botanical agents like peppermint oil and other volatile oils improve rhythmic contractions of the intestine and reduce intestinal spasm, and they also have significant anticandidal activity (16,17).

In addition to enteric-coated peppermint oil capsules, botanical extracts of several herbs can give relief while gut repair ensues. Some botanical medicines used to treat abdominal migraine might be applied to IBS, including essential oils that produce smooth-muscle relaxant effects and foods that augment serotonin or tryptophan levels. Nervines such as *Avena sativa* (oat straw), *Scutellaria*



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lateriflora (skullcap), *Dioscorea villosa* (wild yam), *Lonurus cardiac* (motherwort), and others are calming and antispasmodic. *Piper methysticum* (kava kava) and *Valeriana officinalis* (valerian) can be beneficial because of their GABA-agonist and dopamine-antagonistic potentials (18,19). Adaptogenic botanicals like *Withania somnifera* (ashwagandha) and *Rhodiola rosea* (golden root) may also be helpful (20,21).

As is the case in any medical philosophy, the physician must reach an understanding of and with the patient that guides the choice of clinical therapeutic agents. Nothing helps the suffering of these patients more than acknowledgment of their difficulties, understanding the mechanisms of their condition, and offering hope for relief and the possibility of recovery. ■



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