

Is IBS getting in the way of your marriage?

An encounter with the frustrated husband of a patient with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) led Dr Reuben Wong to wonder about the burden borne by spouses because of the chronic gut condition.

The patient had just left his consultation room when there was a knock on the door. Her husband came inside alone and pleaded with Dr Wong to help his wife get better.

"He told me her symptoms were affecting their marital life negatively, that they no longer had a social life and that he was suffering too," said Dr Wong.

It left a deep impression on the consultant at the department of gastroenterology and hepatology at National University Hospital about the far-reaching impact of IBS.

"When a family member is unwell, we know it affects everyone else in the family too, especially if it's a severe chronic illness," he said.

The phenomenon of partner burden has been described in cancer and dementia, but never explored in gastrointestinal diseases or functional disorders, said Dr Wong.

Not long after, in 2008, Dr Wong left for a postgraduate fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the United States.

There, he embarked on a study comparing the partners of 152 IBS patients against the partners of 39 healthy individuals.

The study found that the partners of IBS patients suffered significantly more burden than partners of healthy people.

The patients' partners completed questionnaires including the Zarit Burden Interview

(ZBI), Relationship Satisfaction Scale and questions on sexual relationships.

The ZBI is a previously validated scale which has also been used to measure the burden suffered by the partners or caregivers of people with dementia, cancer and other conditions.

Partners of those with IBS scored 22.1 on the ZBI total score, compared with 11.5 for the control group and 18.5 for partners of cancer patients.

One in three partners also said they believed that IBS interfered in their sex lives either quite frequently or nearly all the time.

The study also showed that the more severe the IBS, the worse the burden reported by the partner or spouse, said Dr Wong.

But if the couple's relationship was stronger, the perceived burden was less.

The study was published in the Journal Of Clinical Gastroenterology & Hepatology earlier this year.

Its authors were doctors from the Center for Functional GI and Motility Disorders and department of biostatistics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the department of gastroenterology and hepatology of the University Medical Cluster of the National University Health System in Singapore.

Dr Wong, who returned here in 2009, is now hoping to carry his research further.

"In the pipeline is a study to be conducted here, which not only looks at partner burden in Singapore IBS patients, but also evaluates the intervention that will help alleviate this burden," he said.

IBS patients' symptoms are due to an interaction of multiple factors, such as micro-inflammation, stress, previous infections and hypersensitivity of the nerves. These all interact to give the symptoms which are the hallmarks of the condition, said Dr Wong.

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Fans on how they cope with gut problem

I have been suffering from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) since last year. At first, I thought it was indigestion, as the symptoms included diarrhoea, cramps and bloating. When the symptoms persisted, I saw a doctor and had all sorts of tests, before being told it was IBS.

It hits me on and off. It affects my concentration and quality of life, socially and at work, as it is inconvenient and uncomfortable.

I explain my condition to my colleagues and friends so that they will understand when I am unable to perform my best. I have started paying more attention to my health, exercising and making time to relax, avoiding problem food such as chilli, coffee, milk and cabbage and eating regularly and in moderation.

Chris Hua

Suffering from bowel disorder makes my life miserable and affects my work, especially when I need to stay longer in the toilet. My work gets delayed and I cannot do things properly.

I cope by drinking lots of water and eating apples as it makes my stomach strong. I also rub some oil on my abdominal area.

Rhamhona Cabanting Joseph

I have been experiencing IBS for several years. The symptoms include bloating and alternating periods of diarrhoea and constipation.

Whenever I have diarrhoea, I feel an urgent need to go to the toilet immediately. This has greatly affected my life and I have reduced the frequency of my overseas trips, especially long road trips as I may face difficulty locating toilets in foreign lands.

I have tried several remedies, such as reducing the intake of dairy products and fatty food and having low-fat and high carbohydrate meals. I also keep a food diary so as to keep track of what types of food cause the symptoms.

Diet and lifestyle changes are important in decreasing the frequency and severity of IBS symptoms. Besides taking medication, I also maintain a less stressful lifestyle and practise good relaxation techniques, such as yoga and deep breathing.

Mary Leong

I go crazy whenever I am constipated for a few days. I have tried consuming more water and fruit but it has not helped.

The urge to empty my bowels will strike me at the wrong time in the MRT, bus or car, and you know what happens next...

Lisa Chew

I have always had IBS. I tried taking prune juice but it does not help. I was advised by the doctor to eat spinach and bananas to improve my bowel movements but that has not helped either. I avoid taking any medication as I do not want to rely on it.

However, after reducing stress in my life and including more vegetables and water in my diet, my bowel movement has improved. I still occasionally feel abdominal discomfort. I just let it be.

Sherry Wong

I used to experience frequent bloating, heart burn and flatulence. It caused me to burp uncontrollably. It was very embarrassing for me in the office and the symptoms were uncomfortable and frustrating. It affected my work performance and mood.

Now, I chew my food slowly. Meat is harder to digest so I eat less meat to help my digestive system perform better. When I do eat meat, I make sure that I chew it thoroughly.

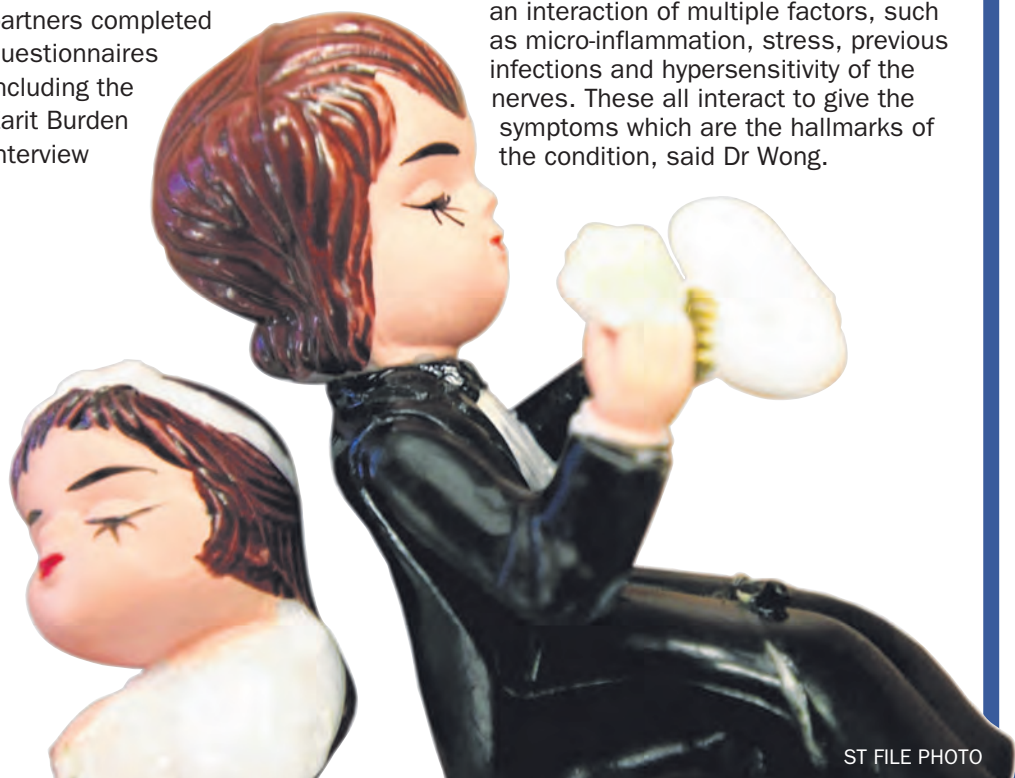
I have also changed my diet to include more vegetables and fruit. My IBS symptoms have reduced as a result.

Jeekeng Chew

WINNER

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