

# Cochrane Corner

## Treatment for irritable bowel

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Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a chronic functional gastrointestinal disorder characterised by recurrent episodes of abdominal pain and altered bowel habit including diarrhoea or constipation. Patients with IBS are usually managed in primary care. IBS is related to diet, stress and psychological factors, and may be triggered by gastro-intestinal infections. The pathophysiological path-

way of IBS is unknown, but it is assumed that symptoms are mediated by the brain-gut axis. Of those patients who seek health care, 50–90% have psychiatric co-morbidity such as anxiety disorders or depression. Reassurance and counselling are essential elements in the management of IBS. The most commonly used pharmacological interventions for IBS in Europe are bulking agents and

antispasmodics. Antidepressant drugs are also used, often as a second-line therapy. To date, most drug trials have been conducted in the secondary care environment in the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States, and have been published in English language journals. In this systematic review, we examine the evidence for the efficacy of these three classes of medication.

	Benefit	Harms	Evidence
<b>Peppermint oil</b>	Improved pain NNTB = 2	Heartburn	Cochrane review <sup>1</sup>
<b>Antispasmodics</b> E.g. dicyclomine	Improved pain NNTB = 4	Anticholinergic side effects	Cochrane review <sup>1</sup>
<b>Antidepressants</b>	Not effective in one review but effective in another <sup>2</sup> NNTB = 3	Harms as for antidepressants	Cochrane review <sup>1</sup> Other review <sup>2</sup>
<b>Bulking agents</b>	Not effective		Cochrane review <sup>1</sup>

NNTB = numbers needed to treat for one remission

NNTH = numbers needed to harm

### Clinical bottom line

Antispasmodic medications such as dicyclomine seem to be effective for the pain of irritable bowel syndrome. The role of antidepressants differs between Cochrane and Clinical evidence with the latter reporting them as effective and the former not.

### References

1. Quartero AO, Meineche-Schmidt V, Muris J, Rubin G, de Wit N. Bulking agents, antispasmodic and antidepressant medication for the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome. The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2005, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD003460.pub2.DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD003460.pub2.
2. Jackson JL, O'Malley PG, Tomkins G, et al. Treatment of functional gastrointestinal disorders with antidepressant medications: a meta-analysis. *Am J Med* 2000;108:65-72.

*Members of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners can have access to the full reviews by contacting Cherylyn Pearson at the College in Wellington. For the access codes to the Cochrane library contact cpearson@rnzcgp.org.nz at the College.*