

Hypnosis May Be Useful IBS Treatment

Large Study Shows Good Long-Term Symptom Relief

By [Salynn Boyles](#)

WebMD Medical News

Reviewed By [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#)

on Tuesday, October 21, 2003

Oct. 21, 2003 -- A new study shows hypnosis may be an effective, long-term therapy for the poorly understood and hard-to-treat gastrointestinal disorder known as irritable bowel syndrome.

In the largest long-term study of hypnotherapy for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) to date, seven out of 10 patients reported an improvement in symptoms after treatment and four out of five responders maintained the improvement for years after stopping hypnosis. Those who did not maintain a response to hypnosis only deteriorated slightly.

"We have known that this treatment is effective, but this study confirms that patients can maintain the improvements for many years," researcher Wendy M. Gonsalkorale, PhD, tells WebMD. "There is growing interest in hypnosis for the treatment of IBS, but too few patients know about it."

Most Sufferers Are Women

As many as 58 million Americans suffer from the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome and four out of five sufferers are women, based on figures from the American College of Gastroenterology. Typically people with IBS have recurrent symptoms of abdominal pain, distention, and altered bowel movements -- diarrhea, constipation, or a combination of both. Because there is no obvious cause for the array of gastrointestinal disturbances experienced by patients and conventional GI treatments often do not work.

It has been almost two decades since British researcher Peter Whorwell and colleagues first reported on the use of hypnotherapy in the treatment of IBS. Since that time other small studies have also shown hypnosis to be effective, but this new research, appearing in the latest issue of *Gut*, is the first to follow a large group of patients for years after treatment.

For the study, Gonsalkorale and Whorwell followed 204 patients for up to six years. Researchers asked patients to score their IBS symptoms, as well as their overall quality of life, and levels of depression and anxiety immediately before hypnotherapy and after the treatment. They also

responded to a mailed questionnaire sent at least a year and no more than six years after treatment ended. The hypnotherapy course consisted of 12-weekly, one-hour sessions.

Almost three-quarters of the patients (71%) gave positive reports following hypnotherapy, and 81% said they maintained their improvement over time. The sustained improvements reported by most of the patients could not be attributed to other treatments because fewer than one in 10 used other treatments following hypnotherapy.

"This study demonstrates that the beneficial effects of hypnotherapy appear to last at least five years," the researchers write. "Thus, it is a viable therapeutic option for the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome."

Cheaper Than Drugs?

Researcher Olafur S. Palsson, PsyD, who has studied IBS says the number of patients in the new study and the length of follow-up put hypnosis in a favorable light and possibly show it may be the most effective long-term treatment for irritable bowel syndrome. But he says that it is still rarely offered to IBS patients and is not often covered by insurance.

"Hypnotherapy still carries the aura of mystery and magic, and is not really used much for medical conditions in this country," Palsson says. "It requires special training that clinicians in most medical settings simply do not have. And it is considered more costly than drug therapy because it requires repeated sessions."

The University of North Carolina researcher says hypnosis may actually be much cheaper than other treatments because the long-term results appear to be so promising.

"There are only a couple of medications approved for the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome, and it can be expensive to keep patients on these medications long-term," says Palsson. "For many patients, hypnotherapy is a very cost-effective way of improving outcome."