

Follow your gut instinct

Mumbai Mirror | Jul 11, 2019, 06.00 AM IST



PICS: SATYAJIT DESAI

After battling IBS for years, Mirror reader Shalini Goenka shares how she overcame the chronic intestinal disorder

Thirteen years ago, following frequent bouts of diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating, I was at the end of my tether. I reached a point when the condition had stalled my life, and I knew I had to take corrective action.

I was 37 then, and it felt that the condition had much to do with my irregular mealtimes, erratic lifestyle, too much spicy and oily food, stress, and was also possibly one of the side effects of the supplements or the asthma and PMS pills that I consumed. Turned out, I had Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), a chronic intestinal disorder. While IBS is not life threatening, only someone who has experienced it, knows how painful and uncomfortable it can get.

Until the diagnosis, I'd relied heavily on anti-diarrhoeal drugs, probiotic supplements, yoga and meditation. I thought my vegetarian diet, comprising wheat rotis, rice, dal, dahi, veggies and salad, along with three glasses of milk per day, was good enough. I was addicted to milk like some people crave tea or coffee. A dietician prescribed eggs to lose weight and build immunity, but my symptoms only got worse.

The turning point

In 2005, I lost my voice following a severe case of ulcer, which had developed on the tip of my tongue. I was miserable and couldn't even take medicines. I realised that I have a sensitive gut and needed to heal myself on a physical, emotional and spiritual level. When I was at my lowest, I read *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin Sharma and it changed my life. I decided to devote time to health and fitness.

When I recovered from ulcers, I joined the Mumbai-based Yoga Institute to educate myself on gut health and the mind-body connection of wellness. I even did a couple of certifications in nutrition counselling and teacher's training in yoga and Pilates. But it was a seminar by Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN), which promotes a holistic healthy lifestyle, that completely altered my outlook.

All diseases begin in the gut...

...said the Greek physician Hippocrates centuries ago, and I believe it wholeheartedly. I learnt that there are two main causes for IBS — food allergies, and too much bad bacteria in the small intestine. The symptoms are either gut-related, such as bloating, constipation and/or diarrhoea, loss of appetite and nausea, or they are non-digestive, which includes mood swings, headaches, anxiety, depression, and fatigue. Some of these symptoms are so severe that they hinder your day-to-day activities.

It's important to understand that there are tons of bacteria in our gut. The good ones, however, must outweigh the bad ones to have a healthy gut.

The elimination round

Things improved when I began to eliminate some items from my diet. The first thing to go was dairy. It was ingrained in me that milk is good, and paneer, buttermilk and dahi are healthy — even for someone who is lactose intolerant like me. It took me some time to understand that our bodies are not genetically built for breaking down animal protein.

The next was gluten. I followed SHARAN's five-point natural diet: go plant-based; go whole; go organic; check Vitamin B12 and Vitamin D. Now, I eat only organic, plant-based whole foods including fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds.

It was tough at first, but almost 70 per cent of my IBS symptoms were taken care of when I stopped consuming dairy. I'd also managed to curb other issues such as gas, cough-and-cold bouts and asthma attacks, and my energy levels improved, too. The best part was that I could taper off my medication.

What I learnt

My IBS journey has taught me two things: listen to your gut, and never ignore any signs the body gives. Don't "learn to deal with it". Instead, get rid of it by taking charge of your health.

Gradually, make a conscious shift, understand the body, follow a whole-food, plant-based diet, exercise regularly, and find a hobby that relaxes you. You will see positive results with this new routine.

A few lessons I've picked up along the way are to not have fruit and veggies together, or have them raw with cooked food. They have different digestive properties and when mixed together, ferment and cause bloating. Also check your vitamin B12 and vitamin D levels periodically — even if you are a non-vegetarian. Their deficiency cause high blood sugar, weight gain, depression, sleep disturbances, muscle ache, anaemia and mental confusion. In case of acute deficiencies, supplements can help.

Mumbai Mirror

Health above all

Goenka starts her day with a tall glass of green smoothie. Lunch is millet or rice-based, with veggies, dal and salad. Her evening meal includes an infusion drink with an oil-free snack, or a fruit, or smoothie. Dinner is the same as lunch, with a soup and salad.

Exercise is an integral part of her routine and she does a combination of yoga, Pilates, jogging, and weight training for four to five days a week.

Along with a healthy diet, she also takes care of her emotional and spiritual health. Goenka now conducts cooking sessions to explain the benefits of plant-based foods and oil-free cooking.

She ends her day with a thank-you prayer and a writing in her gratitude journal.

—As told to Nasrin Modak Siddiqi