

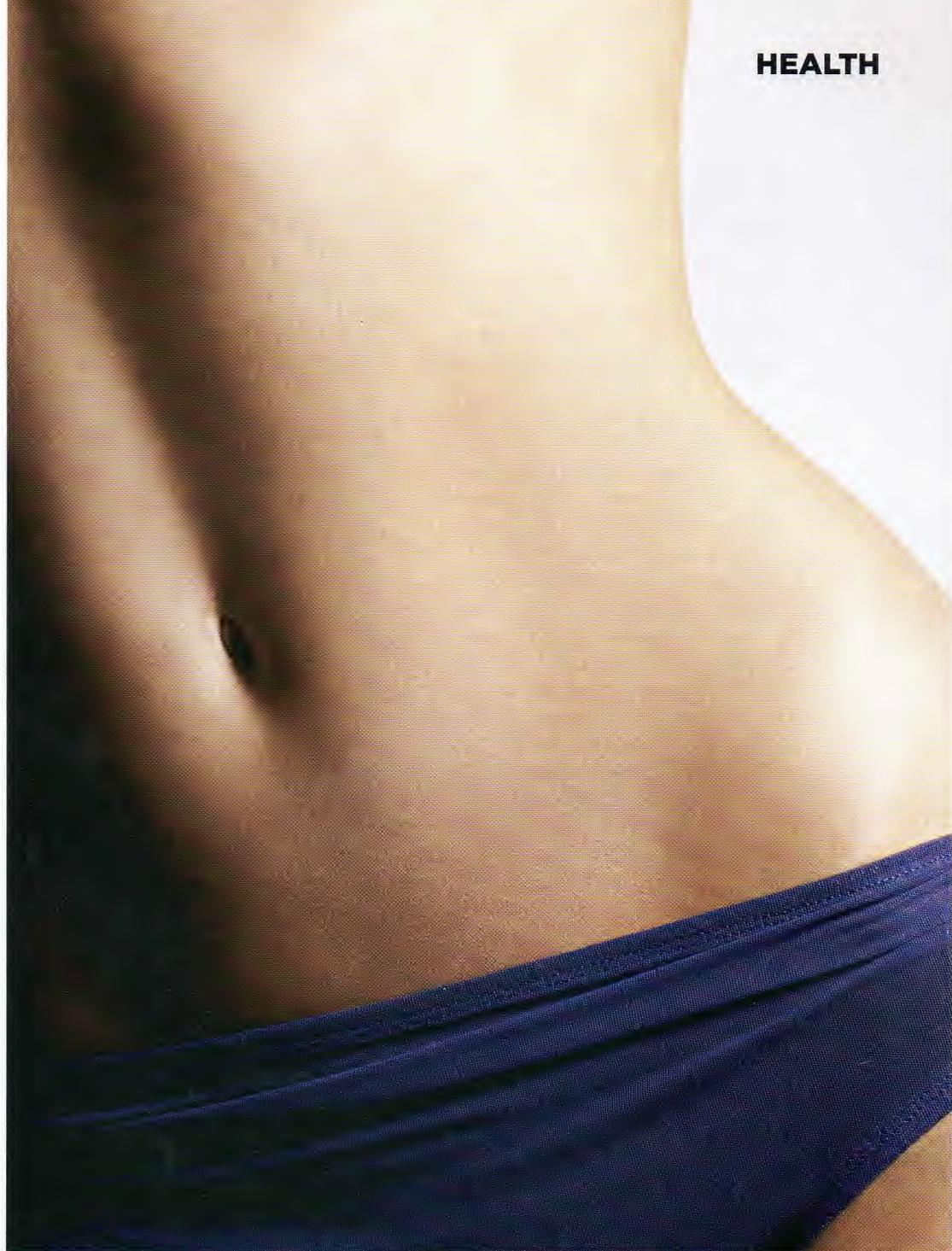
Whisper it: 'I've got IBS'. Those three letters have become the polite code for a whole range of

unmentionable stomach problems, like bloating, pain, constipation, wind and diarrhoea. Or a combination of all of them. Ask anyone who suffers from IBS – that's one in 10 of us – and they'll confirm that although it's not life-threatening, it's tough to live with. 'I get cramping, bloating and constipation,' says Melissa Bullock, 27, a model, from Surrey. 'My stomach can blow up and hurt so much, I have to go to bed.'

Not only is it debilitating, but IBS can be confusing, too. There's no medical agreement on the cause, very few drugs and no cure. Typically, a doctor will only diagnose it if there's nothing else to explain your symptoms (see your GP to rule out any more serious bowel conditions). 'The problem is, IBS is very hard to treat,' admits Professor Peter Whorwell, a gastroenterologist at the University Hospital, South Manchester. 'There haven't been any new medications for over 20 years, so GPs are at their wits' end when the patient keeps coming back, while the patient gives up on the medical profession.'

'The hospital advised me to cut out wheat and dairy, but they didn't give me any other advice,' says Melissa. 'I still had problems, so I cut out other foods, too. At one point, my diet was so restricted – just fish, chicken and some vegetables – that I went from a size 10 to a size 4. I also tried colonic irrigation, but it hurt too much. It has taken nine years of experimenting with foods and supplements to find out what works for me. Now, I take aloe vera and probiotics, avoid wheat and only have limited dairy and no tea and coffee. I exercise regularly and take the anti-spasmodic Buscopan when I'm really in pain. Also, I carry snacks everywhere as I need to eat regularly.'

Go to IBS self-help websites, and the emphasis is on the emotional side of the condition – the belief that stress makes it worse and learning to relax makes it better. But do you really have to learn to live with your symptoms? Not according to



The real reason you're BLOATED

FED UP WITH HAVING A STOMACH LIKE A BALLOON EVERY TIME YOU EAT? IBS AFFECTS ONE IN 10 WOMEN. BRIGID MOSS FINDS OUT WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

private GP Dr Wendy Denning. 'IBS is a dumping ground for a lot of undiagnosed bowel problems,' she says. 'Everyone's bowels get worse when they're tired or stressed.' She says that as many as 80 per cent of her patients with IBS symptoms turn out to have a problem that can be treated to at least minimise their discomfort.

So, if you want solutions, where do you begin with the vast range of natural-health practitioners offering tests, supplements and different diets? Professor Whorwell admits that treatment is a process of trial and error. What suits one person – whether it's a diet, drug or supplement – may make another worse. He starts by cutting out cereal fibre, like wholemeal bread, brown rice or rye, for three months, which, he says, helps 50 per cent of his patients. A more extreme option is the hardcore Addenbrooke's exclusion diet, which helps you find out which foods are aggravating or causing IBS. It's a big undertaking, and not to be done long-term: two weeks without alcohol, beef, potatoes, onion, sweetcorn, baked beans, citrus fruit, all grains except rice, all dairy including goat's milk and sheep's milk, tea, coffee, yeast, vinegar, chocolate, sweets and nuts (see the full diet and lots of other advice in *IBS Solutions* by Professor John Hunter, Vermilion, £10.99).

If you're willing – and can afford to – pay, the IgG antibody test promises to discover your trigger foods. YorkTest will screen for 113 foods (£265, yorktest.com), while a new DIY test from Cambridge Nutritional Sciences tests 59 (£50, food-detective.com). In typically confusing IBS style, there's disagreement among doctors about whether or not these tests are worth doing. A recent *Which?* report found that results varied when the same sample was tested by different companies. 'The latest research does seem to be in favour,' says Professor Whorwell. 'The tests are most helpful when they flag up four or five foods to be avoided. Any more, and they're incompatible with normal life.'

Regardless of the test used, some foods do come up time and time again. In one study of 137 people, the three most common were: egg whites (65 per cent), cow's milk (59 per cent) and soya (51 per cent). So, how do you become sensitised to foods in the first place? Nutritionist Antony Haynes, author of *The Food Intolerance Bible* (Harper Thorsons,

NATURAL SOLUTIONS

● **FIBRE:** Linseed works best, as it's soluble, so doesn't irritate the gut wall or ferment and increase wind. Take two to four tablespoons a day, chew and follow each one with a glass of water.

● **PROBIOTICS:** A new study by gastroenterologist Professor Whorwell found that plain Activia yoghurt, eaten every day, reduces bloating. Other probiotics with studies on IBS symptoms are: Multibionta, Yakult, Quest Lp299v (£19.56 for 60 capsules, auravita.com ☒), BioCare LAB4 Bio-Acidophilus (£18.06 for 60, biocare.co.uk ☒) and ProVen (£12.45 for 30 capsules, verywisenuitrition.co.uk ☒).

● **HERBS:** Some people find peppermint oil and tea help reduce pain. IBSoothe is a combination of herbs, including

peppermint, artichoke, milk thistle, fennel and psyllium (£6.99 for 90, healthydirect.com ☒). Aloe vera can also be soothing; try Pukka Aloe Vera Juice (£19.95 for 1 litre, pukkaherbs.com ☒) or Aloeride tablets (£15.65 for 28 capsules, aloeride.eu ☒).

● **GUT SUPPORTERS:** Antony Haynes recommends Allergy Research Perm A Vite powder to heal gut lining (£33.36, revival.co.uk ☒). Or Higher Nature Glutamine Powder (£11.65 for 100g, victoriahealth.com ☒).

● **DIGESTIVE ENZYMES:** These can help your digestion to function properly. Try LifeTime Vitamins Extrazyme-13 (£19.95 for 90, victoriahealth.com ☒).

For more info, visit theguttrust.org

(lactose intolerance, where you can't digest the sugar in milk, also has IBS-type symptoms). In the UK, Professor Whorwell does advise some patients to try a fructose-free diet, but not without proper nutrition advice.

Ultimately, it may not be a particular food that's to blame at all. 'If you get bloating or symptoms at the same time of day – say after lunch or dinner – but you're not eating the same foods, it's more likely to be due to the fact that your digestive energy is low,' says Haynes. 'In which case, enzymes can help.' (See box.)

Most doctors and natural health practitioners are in favour of probiotics, with new ones being launched specifically to treat IBS. It's been proven that people with IBS tend to have too much of the harmful gut bacteria and not enough of the good stuff, possibly triggered by antibiotics or a bout of stomach flu. So probiotics work, but the downside is that they don't stay put, so you have to take one every day (even better twice a day). You'll also need to try a few to find the one that works for you. 'Try to swap probiotics every few months,' says Dr Denning, 'as your body can get used to just one sort.'

If you really want to discover exactly what's going on in your gut, Dr Denning recommends having your stool tested by a company called Genova Diagnostics (visit gdx.uk.net for a list of practitioners, as you have to be referred). The test will look for lack of enzymes, and overgrowth of the wrong bacteria or yeast or even parasites, which can mimic IBS symptoms. 'After a year of trying all kinds of supplements, my test found both candida (yeast) overgrowth and the presence of

'Relax before you eat and chew food well – reducing stress could be the best way to give your digestion a chance to do its job'

£15.99), believes that inflammation in the gut – caused by stress or infection – lets undigested food particles go through the gut wall into the bloodstream, causing a reaction. The most common culprits, he says, are wheat and dairy. Fix the gut wall with supplements (see box), and you'll stop food intolerances, too.

Another possibility is that you're not digesting your food properly. Currently, the most popular IBS theory in the US is fructose malabsorption. This is when you can't digest fructose, the sugar in fruit

a parasite, which I'm hoping explains my symptoms,' says Kate, a 37-year-old PR, from Sussex. According to Genova Diagnostic's scientific director Dr Nigel Abraham, parasites are discovered in 22 per cent of samples, way above the level accepted by most doctors.

Before embarking on any programme of tests, Dr Haynes advice is simple. 'I tell everyone to relax before they eat, and chew food well,' he says. It sounds simple, but perhaps reducing stress is the best way to give your digestion a chance to do its job. ☐