

Facing the physical symptoms of PTSD



Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation



Irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, can be a debilitating condition. It can affect how you feel, what you eat, and how you socialise and work.

RESEARCH published earlier this year in the *Medical Journal of Australia* by the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF), in partnership with RSL Queensland, found that participants with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had a two to three times greater risk of suffering from gastrointestinal problems like IBS and its associated symptoms of constipation and diarrhoea, as well as other gastrointestinal problems such as stomach ulcers and reflux. We talk to two people with an interest in managing this condition.



DARLENE BROWN

Darlene Brown joined the navy in 1999 in the area of communications. In 2001, Darlene experienced depressive and adjustment disorder symptoms and was discharged in 2005.

“I had my breakdown in August 2003, and in the December started having problems. Until then I had always been regular, but I started getting cramps and bad wind and then I would purge everything. I had never experienced soft stools to this

DR INGRID HICKMAN

Dr Ingrid Hickman is a Principal Research Fellow and Director of Research with the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at the Princess Alexandra Hospital and the Mater Research Institute-UQ in Brisbane.

“The gastrointestinal symptoms commonly experienced with a PTSD diagnosis are generally associated with the autonomic nervous system in the regulation of a stress response or the flight/fight/freeze response. When this happens, the nervous system takes over our physical body and people can experience these gastrointestinal symptoms, irrespective of what they have eaten. It does not discriminate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ diets. There is unlikely to be any particular food that you can include or exclude from your diet that will impact on acute bouts of gastro symptoms associated with this nervous system response.

“However, for long-term health, with a particular focus on gut health, it is important to include fresh fruit and vegetables daily and avoid processed foods and sugar-sweetened drinks. The use of probiotics, either as a drink or tablet, or fermented drinks, such as kombucha, can help to restore good gut bacteria after bouts of diarrhoea or constipation, but are also good to consume as part of a balanced diet. Adequate fluid intake is important for physical and mental health, and regular water as your drink of choice is recommended.

“Trauma processes may be stored in the body, and sometimes the gastrointestinal symptoms may be an early indicator of mental stress. Investigating mind-body approaches to eating, whereby you increase your mindfulness around how, when and why you eat, and the impact of other aspects of eating, such as unity, social connectedness and timing, may help you identify dietary triggers of these symptoms.”



extent and for so long. I was anxious and upset as this had never happened to me before. I saw a dietitian and had an endoscopy and colonoscopy, and was eventually diagnosed with IBS.

“When I was working on base, I didn’t make it to the toilet and had an accident in my white shorts, which was so embarrassing. After this, I always worried about what I was eating and where the closest toilet was. Within a half-hour of getting stressed I would be on the toilet purging. I remember the first time I went to Mates4Mates I purged four times before I went, and that was just one morning. It was horrendous, but now it’s a lot better. I have to change my diet from time to time as I am intolerant to certain foods. I keep an eye on it and have maintenance (colonoscopies) every five years.

“That’s why I value the research being done at GMRF. Research combined with increased awareness means GPs and other healthcare professionals are more likely to consider the physical symptoms of PTSD and treat it early. Also, my IBS symptoms are more likely to be recognised as a symptom of my PTSD diagnosis. There were times when I wanted to give up – it didn’t matter what I did, it didn’t last or it didn’t work, but now I’m getting the right treatment and drinking and eating the right things to fuel my body. The progress I’ve made makes me appreciate how far I’ve come.”

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Long considered a solely psychological condition, research conducted by GMRF’s PTSD Initiative found that PTSD contributed to long-term poor physical health outcomes for sufferers, including heart, liver and sleep issues. For more information visit www.gallipoliresearch.com.au/Site/VETERANS.

