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THE GUT TRUST OFFERS SELF MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME FOR IBS SUFFERERS unique interactive programme for managing irritable bowel syndrome

The Gut Trust, the charity that supports people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), is offering a unique and comprehensive programme of information and advice to its members to enable them to lead fuller lives. The Self Help Management Programme comprises 11 modules, adapted for study via a computer, supported by fact sheets and links to other useful websites.

Between 10 and 20 per cent of the population of the UK – and of other Western countries – fulfil the diagnostic criteria for IBS at any one time. This represents between six and 12 million people in Britain alone.

IBS affects all ages, from children to late middle age (rarer in old age), and more women are diagnosed than men. Usual symptoms include cramping abdominal pain; diarrhoea or constipation or the alternating conditions of both; bloating, excessive wind, urgency and incontinence if a toilet is not nearby, sharp pain in the rectum.

The Gut Trust advises anyone who believes they may have IBS to visit a doctor in the first instance. A number of other conditions and diseases have similar or overlapping symptoms and these should be ruled out before a diagnosis of IBS is made.

Once diagnosis of IBS has been confirmed, the doctor can prescribe medication depending on the symptoms.

The causes of IBS are frequently obscure although emotional stress, difficult life changes and food intolerances can play a part. The disease can lead to lost days at work or to unemployment, an inability to participate fully in social, leisure and sporting events that others take for granted, and in some cases, result in people being afraid to leave their own home. The level of stigma, embarrassment and low self esteem are also factors in reducing the quality of life for people with IBS.

The Self Management Programme was devised by Professor Nick Read, the Trust's medical advisor, who has held chairs in Gastro-intestinal Physiology, Human Nutrition and Integrated Medicine at the University of Sheffield. The programme guides patients through modules that encourage them to understand how the digestive system works and the impact of IBS.

There are also modules relating to diet and allergies, coping with stress, and the steps for self management. It deals with managing emotions as well as medical management. A further module looks at the value and effectiveness of complementary therapies.

Each module has exercises that allow the patient to identify what is relevant to them, and gives links to other associated subjects – from relaxation techniques to counselling and psychotherapy. There are also accompanying fact sheets and CDs.

'An informed patient is a confident patient and a patient who is confident feels better', Dr Read says. 'In designing this course I wanted patients with IBS to have all the resources they needed to manage their condition themselves and to have an informed dialogue with their doctors and specialists'.

Jonathan Blanchard Smith, chairman of The Gut Trust and himself has IBS, says: 'IBS is not the sort of illness that can ever really be cured but it can be managed successfully so that it retreats into the background of a person's life.'

'Don't let IBS rule your life; find out what you can do to relieve your symptoms. Patients often find diet and drugs disappointing and so, with help from our many advisors we have devised this Self Management Programme, which is available to anyone joining the Trust. As IBS is a chronic condition, we also continue to support people on a long term basis.'

The Gut Trust offers information, advice and support of a range of issues relating to IBS, as well as a regular journal, fact sheets, a 'Can't Wait' card, an email discussion forum and a helpline with links to health professionals. The Gut Trust Helpline is on 0114 272 3253 from 6 to 9 pm on weekdays and 10 to 12 noon on Saturday mornings. For more information, see www.theguttrust.org, or write to The Gut Trust, Unit 5, 53 Mowbray Street, Sheffield, S3 8EN. You can also email the Trust at info@theguttrust.org

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