PATIENT RESOURCES

Other treatments for IBS and functional dyspepsia

CBT, gut-directed hypnotherapy, acupuncture and other options.

These treatments can help reduce digestive symptoms and make day-to-day life easier. We can discuss what the evidence shows, what each approach involves and whether it is worth trying for you.

By Dr Henry Wei

Three things to know

- CBT and gut-directed hypnotherapy can help some people with IBS, including people who do not feel anxious.
- Regular practice helps. Choose an approach you can fit into your week and afford to finish.
- The evidence depends on the condition and the programme. Acupuncture and general relaxation have different evidence from IBS-specific CBT and hypnotherapy.

Why treat the gut–brain connection?

The gut and brain send messages to each other throughout the day. In IBS and functional dyspepsia, normal stretching, digestion or movement can feel uncomfortable. Poor sleep, stress and worrying about the next episode can increase that sensitivity. Symptoms can also occur when you feel relaxed. The discomfort is real. Using these treatments does not mean symptoms are imagined or that you have caused them.



Brain and nervous system

Attention · expectation · pain processing





Stomach and bowel

Stretching · movement · sensation

Ordinary gut sensations may produce stronger discomfort. The brain's response can then influence gut sensitivity and movement.

A simplified explanation of proposed mechanisms. These treatments may change how sensations are processed and how the nervous system responds. The exact effects vary between people.

CBT

CBT helps change responses to symptoms, such as expecting the worst or avoiding activities. Practising these skills may reduce symptom-related fear, attention and disability.

Hypnotherapy

Guided relaxation and gut-focused imagery may change pain processing and the response to gut sensations. Repeated practice aims to make those sensations easier to manage.

When symptoms and worry reinforce each other

Pain or urgency can make you watch your gut more closely and worry about the next episode. Tension and avoiding activities may then keep that worry going. This can happen automatically. It is one pattern that may contribute to symptoms, and treatment can help change it.

Gut discomfort

Pain, bloating or urgency draws your attention.

How CBT helps — CBT helps you develop a practical response to discomfort and continue manageable activities.

How hypnotherapy helps — Gut-focused imagery and suggestion may change pain processing and make gut sensations feel less intrusive.

Expecting another episode

"What if it happens again?" You may keep checking how your gut feels.

How CBT helps — Talk through worries about symptoms, such as being caught short when you go out, and learn ways to feel more confident without constantly checking your gut.

How hypnotherapy helps — Guided practice may reduce how strongly your attention is drawn to symptoms.

Avoiding more things

Skipping meals or cancelling plans may bring short-term relief, but can leave you less confident about the next time.

How CBT helps — With support, gradually return to activities or foods you have been avoiding unnecessarily. Repeated experience can rebuild confidence.

How hypnotherapy helps — As symptoms become easier to manage, confidence may improve. Persistent avoidance may also benefit from CBT.

More tension and sensitivity

The body becomes more alert. Gut sensations can feel stronger.

How CBT helps — Relaxation skills and a less threatening interpretation of symptoms may reduce the body's alert response.

How hypnotherapy helps — Relaxation and repeated gut-directed suggestions aim to reduce sensitivity and support a calmer response.

The steps can reinforce each other. Symptoms may feel harder to manage and take up more of your day.

A simplified explanation. These treatments may reduce the strength and impact of the cycle with practice. Improvement varies, and symptoms can have other contributing factors.

ACG IBS guideline — gut-directed psychological therapies

Which treatments are worth considering?

We can discuss these alongside dietary changes and medicines. The choice depends on your symptoms, preferences and what you have already tried.

Treatment	What you do	What the evidence says
Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)	Learn practical ways to respond to symptoms, reduce repeated checking and gradually return to meals, travel or activities you have been avoiding.	Recommended in IBS guidelines. Trials support improvements in symptoms and daily functioning. The overall certainty is limited by study methods and differences between programmes.
Gut-directed hypnotherapy	Listen to guided relaxation and imagery focused on digestive comfort. You remain aware and in control.	Recommended in IBS guidelines. Both therapist-led and some digital programmes have trial evidence. Evidence for functional dyspepsia is promising but smaller.
Relaxation, breathing and mindfulness	Practise comfortable breathing, relaxation or attention exercises regularly.	May help coping and stress. Evidence for digestive symptom relief is less consistent. A general wellbeing app has its own purpose and evidence.
Acupuncture	A practitioner places fine needles at selected points. A course usually involves repeated visits.	IBS trials have not consistently shown benefit beyond sham acupuncture, and NICE advises against encouraging it for IBS. Functional dyspepsia trials are more encouraging, particularly for fullness and early satiety.

Why do guidelines recommend CBT and hypnotherapy?

Trials have found benefits for overall IBS symptoms, and some studies show benefits lasting after treatment finishes. British guidelines recommend IBS-specific CBT and gut-directed hypnotherapy, while rating the evidence as low certainty. Blinding is difficult, studies use different comparisons and outcomes, and access varies. Guideline support applies to the treatment approach; individual apps still need their own evidence.

British Society of Gastroenterology IBS guideline · NICE IBS recommendations

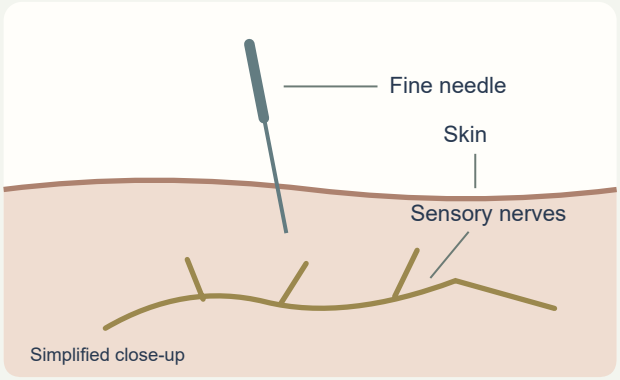
Does this also help functional dyspepsia?

Functional dyspepsia can cause upper abdominal discomfort, early fullness or feeling uncomfortably full after meals. CBT, stress management and hypnotherapy may help, but the evidence is less established than for IBS. The British guideline makes cautious recommendations based on very low-certainty evidence.

Acupuncture deserves a separate discussion here. A 2026 review found benefit compared with sham acupuncture. Studies differ in the treatment given and mainly come from overseas settings. Whether the same results apply to a particular NZ treatment course remains uncertain.

Functional dyspepsia guideline · 2026 acupuncture review

What happens during acupuncture?



The practitioner uses fine, sterile, single-use needles at selected sites. The sites and depth depend on the treatment.

How might it affect symptoms?

1. Needling stimulates tissues and nearby sensory nerves.
2. Those signals travel through the nervous system.
3. This may influence how pain is processed. Relaxation, expectations and the treatment setting can also contribute.

The mechanism is still being studied. Whether it improves digestive symptoms depends on the condition and the treatment used.

Acupuncture — evidence and safety, US National Institutes of Health

Options you can explore from New Zealand

Start with the practical details below. Mind Over Gut and Nerva were developed in Australia. The NZ links help with local information and finding a practitioner.

Which option might suit me?

- **Prefer free self-guided support?** Mind Over Gut offers coping skills, if you meet its eligibility criteria and can manage the practice time.
- **Prefer short daily audio sessions?** Nerva is a paid option with trial evidence for IBS. Check the full cost before subscribing.
- **Want help with your own difficulties?** A therapist with gut-focused training can adapt treatment to your symptoms and circumstances. Ask about fees and experience before booking.

You do not need to pay for an app to discuss these treatments with us.

Mind Over Gut

Free online resilience programme

Combines CBT, stress management and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). It focuses on coping with gastrointestinal symptoms and their impact on life.

Time
Seven weekly modules, about 30 minutes each, plus around 20–40 minutes of daily practice. Allow about 45 minutes for the initial questionnaire.

Cost
Listed as free by the provider.

Before starting
Use a desktop or laptop. The provider says the programme is not designed for phones or tablets. It is in English, and eligibility restrictions apply, including for people currently receiving mental-health care. Keep your existing care in place and discuss whether another option would suit you.

The programme's evidence and aims differ from an IBS-specific hypnotherapy course. Symptom improvement cannot be assumed from evidence for CBT in general.

Read about Mind Over Gut

Nerva

Paid app with gut-directed audio sessions

Time
About 15 minutes daily for six weeks, with additional learning and practice.

Cost
Subscription fees apply. Check the NZ checkout for currency, total charge, renewal and cancellation terms before signing up. A free assessment may lead to a paid programme.

Before starting
Consider whether self-guided audio suits you. The app does not provide live, individual therapy.

A randomised IBS trial supports its six-week hypnotherapy programme. Evidence from that programme does not automatically establish the benefit of every newer app feature or its use for dyspepsia.

Explore Nerva

A therapist in New Zealand

Individual support, in person or by video

Time
A course of appointments plus practice between sessions. Ask for session length, frequency and expected number of visits before booking.

Cost
Private fees vary. Ask for the total likely course cost and check any insurance or local funding eligibility.

What to ask
"Do you have training and experience in IBS-specific CBT or gut-directed hypnotherapy?" For acupuncture, ask about the evidence for your particular condition and when you will review progress.

Find a psychologist in NZ · Check a psychologist's registration · Chinese Medicine Council register

Programme information checked 18 November 2026. Fees and eligibility can change. A verified NZ-dollar price for Nerva was not available from the public pages checked.

How much improvement did the Nerva trial show?

At six weeks, 81% in the hypnotherapy group and 63% in the comparison group reached the study's threshold for improvement in IBS symptoms. The comparison group used a similar digital programme without hypnotherapy. Improvement meant a fall of at least 50 points on a symptom score; participants could still have symptoms.



The trial enrolled 244 adults, mostly women. These results describe this study and cannot predict an individual response.

Read the randomised trial

Make a trial worthwhile

1. **Choose a goal.** Less pain, fewer urgent toilet trips, or being able to eat out more comfortably.
2. **Choose a realistic routine.** Set aside a regular time for the course and its home practice.
3. **Review after the course.** Compare symptoms and everyday activities with your starting point. Discuss a different approach if the benefit is small or the cost is becoming a burden.

Do I need to feel stressed for this to work?

No. Gut-directed treatment can help people whose main problem is digestive discomfort. Stress is one influence on gut sensitivity. Sleep, previous infections and the way gut signals are processed can also contribute.

Could there be side effects?

Some exercises can bring up uncomfortable feelings. Pause and discuss these with your therapist if needed. Acupuncture can cause soreness or bruising; serious complications are uncommon but possible. Tell the practitioner about blood-thinning medicines and relevant medical conditions.

When should we reassess the symptoms?

New bleeding, unintentional weight loss, persistent vomiting, difficulty swallowing or a substantial change in symptoms needs medical assessment. We can also review the diagnosis and treatment if the planned course has not helped.

Further information

- Healthify NZ — IBS and treatment options
- bpacnz — CBT and gut-directed hypnotherapy
- Understanding IBS
- Eating with IBS