Mindfulness
Over Matter

By Christina Hicks, MS, APRN, WHNP-BC

Learning ways to manage stress when IC symptoms flare can be difficult, but research shows it can lessen symptoms.

In many cases, stress and interstitial cystitis (IC) can create a vicious cycle—IC may cause stress in one’s life, but stress may cause or worsen IC symptoms. As with many autoimmune diseases, stress appears to be the most inciting factor for an IC flare, according to a 2014 article by researchers Philip C. and David C. Bosch published in the journal Reviews in Urology. The researchers surveyed IC patients and found that 70 percent reported that their symptoms negatively impacted their home lives and relationships. Of those patients, 84 percent also reported a negative impact on their employment or an inability to work. It’s not surprising, then, that stress has such a strong impact on IC patients and their families, friends, and coworkers.

Given that stress is a strong aggravating factor of IC symptoms, it is important to learn effective coping strategies and stress management techniques in order to prevent flares and maintain the control or remission of symptoms. As a matter of fact, the American Urological Association (AUA) lists stress management as one of the first-line treatment options for IC in its treatment guidelines, and Bosch and Bosch say that coping mechanisms for stress management play a large role in the outcomes of IC symptoms.

It is accepted knowledge that exercise releases endorphins and helps to reduce stress and boost mood, so for patients that are able to tolerate exercise in any form, gentle activities can be a wonderful stress management technique. However, it’s important to start slow and test your body’s response to various activities.
Breaking the IC-Stress Cycle

IC patients shared with ICA Update their favorite stress-management techniques. Ranging from meditation and relaxation to therapy and exercise, these techniques can help patients keep stress from exacerbating IC symptoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress Management Techniques</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acupuncture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversions</td>
<td>Coloring; Crafting; Gardening, Listening to Music; Photography; Reading; Watching TV; Video Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>Calm Walking; Stretching; Yoga; Other activities as tolerated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heat or Cold Therapy</td>
<td>Heating Pads; Icepacks; Warm Baths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>Focus on Breathing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Agents &amp; Medications</td>
<td>Ativan; Baking Soda ½ TSP in Water; Oral or Compounded Vaginal Valium; Pyridium, Uribelle, or Urogesc Blue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Therapy</td>
<td>Myofascial Massage; Pelvic Floor Relaxation; Trigger Point Release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
<td>Breathing Exercises; Belly Breathing; Guided Imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>Friends; Pets; Family; Animal Therapy; Co-Workers; Healthcare Providers; Prayer/Church; Support Groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stress Management Strategies**

One important strategy for coping with the stress associated with IC is to obtain advice and social support from friends, family, healthcare providers, and support groups. Social support has been shown to provide a better sense of control over one’s symptoms and decrease depression, according to Bosch and Bosch. Additionally, patients with appropriate coping abilities demonstrate an overall increased quality of life, the researchers write.

Stress management also can help IC patients avoid negative coping mechanisms, such as catastrophizing and venting about their illness. Both of these coping strategies have been associated with increased depression and pain, according to Bosch and Bosch. Moreover, they also may negatively impact the social relationships that are so important for IC patients, as people often avoid others who are constantly negative. (For more on catastrophizing, see p. 18.)

**Positive Thinking**

Since negative thoughts can’t cure IC, it’s vital to focus on positive thinking. To that end, Arizona IC patient Patty Kutz spent several years in cognitive behavioral therapy, an evidence-based practice that focuses on helping people develop personal coping strategies that can help break negative thought patterns. Mindfulness has helped Kutz dramatically improve her life, she says. In particular, she says it’s important to recognize how things make you feel—including how your body is feeling in the moment—and recognize and accept them without judging. “It’s just what’s happening,” she explains.

“Mindfulness is also a form of meditation,” Kutz says. “You can do it with anything—eating, listening to music. During a flare, it is more challenging, but then that’s when you need mindfulness the most. You have to notice the feeling, recognize it, and say ‘it’s just what’s happening.’”

Another IC patient, Mindy Cox of California, practices similar mindfulness techniques. When she recognizes
that she is starting to have a flare, she accepts that the flare is something happening to her in the moment, but also focuses on reassuring herself that it will not last forever—that it will end. “It’s okay. I got it. It’s going to go away,” Cox says of her thinking during flares.

Other Activities

In addition to cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and positive thinking, IC patients who responded to a Summer 2017 ICA Update survey shared a wide range of other helpful stress management techniques, ranging from breathing exercises and social activities to distractions such as gardening, watching television, and other hobbies and activities. (See the table on previous page.)

One surprise from the survey was that many IC patients reported exercise—everything from walking and gentle stretches to yoga—as stress management techniques for IC symptoms, given that exercise often can exacerbate those same symptoms. At the same time, it is accepted knowledge that exercise releases endorphins and helps to reduce stress and boost mood, so for patients that are able to tolerate exercise in any form, gentle activities can be a wonderful stress management technique.

However, it’s important to start slow and test your body’s response to various activities. And stay away from activities such as cycling, running, and high-impact sports, which are associated with aggravating pelvic floor muscles, potentially causing spasms and voiding symptoms like those associated with IC. The AUA also recommends avoiding anything intended to strengthen or tighten pelvic floor muscles, including kegels. Conversely, yoga may help relax the pelvic floor and provide symptom relief, according to researchers. Walking has proven to be a controversial topic, as some researchers have argued that it indirectly strengthens the pelvic floor. Many IC patients, however, tolerate calm walking and find it relaxing.

Take It Easy

Like many of the factors influencing IC, stress management often is an intensely personal factor—what works for one patient may not for another. However, in order to break the cycle of stress-induced IC and IC-induced stress, the most important thing is to remain positive, IC patients say. “Take time for yourself,” Cox says. “Find a positive support person. Be okay with pain and that not everything is perfect. It’s okay to have bad days.”

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