



# "Digest This"

A monthly newsletter from Dr. Carey Strom, MD, FASGE

The next post-COVID pandemic...anxiety?

**October 21, 2022**

## **My Dear Patients:**

Everyone seems to be stressed out, post-pandemic, which may be affecting your gut.

Did you know that your brain has a direct effect on your intestines? Have you ever been nauseous right before a presentation, or had a "gut-wrenching" experience? The GI tract is sensitive to all types of emotions and can trigger GI symptoms. Not only can your brain send signals to your gut, but a troubled intestine can also send signals to your brain.

The brain and intestines share such an intimate connection with each other--the gut-brain axis. A sensitive stomach can be caused by many things with stress, anxiety, and depression being three of the leading causes. Often, these functional GI disorders can only be healed by addressing the underlying emotion.

Our gut microbiome (gut flora) plays a key role in digesting food and regulating the immune systems. Scientists believe a dysregulation in our gut microbiome can also affect our mental health. Stress and anxiety releases stress hormones and inflammatory cytokines (small proteins that can cause inflammation) that can change the composition of our microbiome. This results in the release of different

toxins and metabolites that can affect our intestines and be perceived as abdominal discomfort.

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is often associated with anxiety and depression. It is suspected that our gut microbiome is altered in irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Serotonin (the happy hormone) mostly resides in our gut, plays a role in mood stabilization and is regulated by our microbiome. Therefore, an altered microbiome can affect our serotonin levels. Often treating the anxiety and/or the depression symptoms can relieve the GI symptoms. Therefore, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI's), the drugs that are used for anxiety and depression, may also help relieve IBS symptoms when used in lower doses. Psychotherapy can also be helpful. It is encouraged to engage in relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, and physical exercise. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) can also be very helpful.

One's gut health can be improved by taking probiotics. Probiotics help support a healthy microbiome. Fermented foods are a natural source of probiotics. These include kefir, kombucha, sauerkraut, miso, kimchi, and sourdough bread.

If you are experiencing any digestive issues or symptoms such as bloating, gas, distention, abdominal discomfort, and altered bowel habits, you may be suffering from irritable bowel syndrome which could possibly be related to low grade anxiety or depression. Please reach out to our office since new emerging therapies may be useful.

For more information, or to know if you are **up to date with your colonoscopy or endoscopy screenings**, please do not hesitate to call us at our office at 310-550-0400 or email us at [info@doctorstrom.com](mailto:info@doctorstrom.com).

### **Our Advocacy Program**

We have had enormous interest in our program. Our office would be the liaison between you and your doctors for your other medical issues that are *not* necessarily gastrointestinal related. Some of the benefits would be educating you and your family regarding your medical condition by accessing your medical records with your permission, asking appropriate questions to your healthcare providers that you may not know to ask, and make sure that you are

compliant with your medications and treatment plan. Everybody has experienced that with the electronic medical records there is less communication between healthcare providers and things may be overlooked. We bridge the gap between you and your entire medical team to give you peace of mind. We will also give you direct access to the doctor with a private cell phone number. This model is akin to having a trusted relative who is a doctor that you can access easily. Since many of you did not receive the original letter sent out last month, it is attached below. Please don't hesitate to contact our office if you have questions about our program.

Have you ever left the hospital or the doctor's office with more questions than when you entered?

If your doctor did not come to the hospital to visit you, how many different hospitalists did you see?

Have you ever tried to call your doctor after-hours and was not able to get a hold of them?

Have you ever talked to a physician assistant or nurse practitioner but would rather speak to the doctor?

Did you ever wish you had a kid who was a doctor?

Unfortunately, you are not alone. Being sick, injured, or recovering from surgery are all situations that makes a patient feel vulnerable. Many people find themselves frustrated and confused once they leave a health care facility. Unfortunately, electronic medical records lend to less verbal communication between patients and doctors thus issues may fall through the cracks. Many of us have tried to use patient portals for the electronic medical record but still do not know how to interpret their results which causes undo stress and anxiety. Many of you have asked me about patient advocacy programs.

I will relate a personal experience. When I was visiting my father several years ago in Florida, he was hospitalized for fainting. I was dressed in an unassuming way--in a T-shirt, blue jeans, and a baseball cap--and didn't identify myself as a doctor. I requested to speak to the doctor before my dad was discharged because

there was no explanation for his symptom. The physician assistant told me that the doctor was very busy, and I can't speak to him. I told him I just needed about 30 seconds, yet I was still denied. The physician assistant then proceeded to say, "Ask me the question and I'll pass it on to the doctor."

So, I said "Really?"

He said "Sure, go right ahead."

I said, "My dad has sinus bradycardia with a rate of 34 with syncope and probably a vasovagal episode." The PA then proceeded to ask me if I was a doctor and I said, "Yes I am." Then, and only then, was I finally able to speak to his cardiologist. My dad had a pacemaker later that day. Just imagine if I wasn't there to be my father's advocate.

Patient advocacy is not something new to the healthcare industry; as a matter of fact, the complexity of the health care system has given rise to this new profession-the patient advocate.

Several organizations provide training to those who want to be a patient advocate including the Professional Patient Advocate, the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates, and the National Association of Health Care Advocacy to name a few. UCLA extension classes also has a program that educates people about becoming patient advocates.

A healthcare advocate can be a spouse, relative, friend, caregiver, nurse or physician. Although all patients should have an advocate, unfortunately many do not.

What our patient advocacy program offers is a way for you to better understand your medical issues, by the advocate taking the time to communicate on your behalf with your healthcare providers regarding treatment, procedures and access your electronic health records (with your permission). So, we can refer to test results, notes, and medications to explain to you in simple and clear terms what's going on with your health which give you more of a voice and role in your medical care. Studies show this leads to less anxiety, less confusion, and better satisfaction. We have had many inquiries. If you are interested to hear about our patient advocacy program, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Carey B. Strom, MD, FASGE  
Associate Clinical Professor, UCLA School of Medicine  
Board Certified Internal Medicine and Gastroenterology  
Department of Gastroenterology Cedars-Sinai Medical Center  
8631 W. 3rd St, Suite 1017E  
Los Angeles, CA 90048  
**310.550.0400**  
310.285.0482 Fax  
info@doctorstrom.com  
[www.doctorstrom.com](http://www.doctorstrom.com)