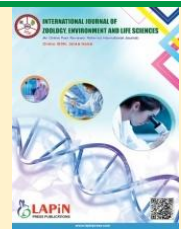




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## UNANI MEDICINE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO GUT HEALTH

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### Background:

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (*Sehj-e-Ama*) (IBS) is a prevalent digestive condition that disrupts normal bowel function, leading to symptoms like abdominal discomfort, pain, and irregular bowel habits. Unlike other gastrointestinal disorders, IBS does not cause any visible structural damage. Although it is frequently diagnosed in clinical settings, its underlying causes are not yet fully understood. In the past, many healthcare professionals considered IBS to be a physical reaction to psychological stress rather than a distinct medical condition. Managing IBS can be challenging for both patients and doctors, as it significantly affects daily life and lacks a straightforward treatment. While the exact cause remains uncertain, factors such as stress, anxiety, depression, diet, and gut bacteria are believed to play a role in its development. The condition is mainly characterized by symptoms such as constipation, diarrhea, bloating, and abdominal pain. Since medical tests typically show no abnormalities, diagnosis relies on assessing symptoms and medical history. At present, there is no definitive cure for IBS in any medical system. However, Unani medicine has long suggested various herbal and compound formulations to help manage digestive disorders. This review explores the preventive and therapeutic approaches to IBS within the Unani system of medicine.

**Keywords:** Alternative Medicine, Constipation, Gut Health, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Sejh-e-Ama.

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### Introduction

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common digestive disorder that affects bowel movements, causing abdominal pain, discomfort, and irregularity. Unlike other gastrointestinal conditions, IBS does not lead to any visible structural damage<sup>1</sup>. Although it is frequently encountered in medical practice, its exact causes remain unclear. In the

past, many doctors believed IBS was a psychological response to stress rather than a physical condition [1,2]. IBS is also referred to by different names, such as spastic colon, nervous indigestion, irritable colon, and mucus colitis [3]. It affects around 10–15% of people at some point in their lives, but only a fraction seeks medical advice. The condition is a major reason for gastrointestinal consultations and significantly impacts work attendance

and overall well-being. Women, particularly younger ones, are diagnosed with IBS two to three times more often than men [4]. Globally, about 10–20% of adults and teenagers experience IBS-related symptoms, with studies showing a higher prevalence among females. The symptoms tend to fluctuate over time and often coexist with other health issues like chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, headaches, menstrual pain, indigestion, backaches, and urinary problems [1,4]. Research suggests that 5–10% of IBS patients have experienced past emotional or physical trauma<sup>4</sup>. Some experts propose that IBS could be a mild form of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) or that the two conditions are closely linked [5].

The classical Unani system of medicine does not specifically mention IBS. However, many conditions described in ancient Unani texts, such as *Sahj-e-Ama* (Catarrhal Enteritis), *Zalqul Ama*, *Zaheer Kazib* (Dysentery), and *Ishal* (Diarrhea), share similar symptoms [6]. Treatments for these conditions have been documented and successfully practiced by Unani physicians for centuries.

In modern medicine, there is no definitive cure for IBS; treatment mainly focuses on symptom relief. Psychological therapies are often recommended, and some doctors prescribe antidepressants like amitriptyline [4]. While these medications may provide temporary relief, they often have side effects and do not address the root cause of the condition.

Given these challenges, Unani medicine offers a promising alternative for managing IBS. Its natural remedies may help alleviate symptoms effectively without the drawbacks of conventional treatments.

### Causes of IBS

IBS primarily results from abnormal bowel movements. The natural contractions of the intestines become irregular, sometimes slowing down digestion and leading to constipation, while at other times speeding it up, causing diarrhea.

Stress is a major factor in IBS due to the strong link between the brain and the gut. Emotional states like anxiety, anger, or stress can trigger spasms in the intestines. Although the exact mechanisms are not fully understood, it is clear that just as stress can cause nausea in healthy individuals; it can lead to bowel issues in people with IBS.

Studies show that IBS patients experience higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to those with other digestive disorders. Ongoing stress or unresolved emotional conflicts may increase the likelihood of developing IBS [5].

The diet also plays an important role. Some individuals are sensitive to specific food ingredients, particularly certain carbohydrates called FODMAPs (fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides, and polyols). These substances, found in foods like dairy,

fruits, and artificial sweeteners, ferment in the intestines, causing bloating, pain, and irregular bowel movements<sup>4</sup>.

Certain medications, excessive alcohol intake, and laxatives can also contribute to IBS symptoms. Some common food triggers include chocolate, dairy, and caffeine-containing drinks like coffee, tea, and cola [5].

### Causes in the Unani System of Medicine [6,7,8]

Unani medicine attributes IBS to an imbalance of bodily fluids (humours). The possible causes include:

- Excess accumulation of bile and phlegm in the intestines.
- Presence of burnt black bile, which irritates the intestines.
- Salty phlegm irritates the intestinal walls.
- Passage of dry, hard stool causing friction.
- Use of harmful substances that irritate the gut.
- Overuse of strong laxatives.
- Presence of excessive toxic fluids in the intestines.
- Cold stomach leading to digestive issues.
- Alcohol consumption.
- Indigestion.

### Types of IBS [9]

IBS can be classified into four main types:

1. **IBS with Diarrhea (IBS-D):** Frequent loose stools.
2. **IBS with Constipation (IBS-C):** Hard, infrequent stools.
3. **Mixed IBS (IBS-M):** Alternating diarrhea and constipation.
4. **Unclassified IBS (IBS-U):** Symptoms that do not fit into the above categories.

### Symptoms of IBS [1,2,4]

IBS affects individuals of all ages but is more common in women and usually starts before the age of 45. The main symptoms include:

1. **Abdominal Pain or Discomfort:**
  - The most common symptom.
  - Cramping pain, usually in the lower abdomen.
  - Pain often improves after passing stool.
2. **Bloating**
  - Increases throughout the day.
  - Not necessarily caused by excess gas.
3. **Irregular Bowel Movements**
  - Constipation, diarrhea, or alternating between the two.
  - Constipation: Hard, small stools with discomfort.
  - Diarrhea: Frequent bowel movements with loose stools.

4. **Mucus in Stool**
  - Common in IBS but does not involve rectal bleeding.
5. **Incomplete Bowel Emptying**
  - Feeling like the bowel hasn't fully emptied.
  - Needing multiple trips to the bathroom.
6. **General Health**
  - Patients maintain a normal weight and overall good health.
7. **Upper Digestive Issues**
  - About 25–50% of IBS patients experience heartburn, nausea, indigestion, and occasional vomiting.

### Symptoms in Unani Medicine [6]

According to Unani medicine, IBS results from an imbalance of bodily fluids, leading to symptoms like gas, indigestion, abdominal pain, constipation, watery stools, mucus in stool, bloating, and restlessness. The symptoms depend on the dominant humour causing irritation.

1. **Bilious Type (Safravi):** Yellowish stool, burning sensation, mucus with bile, thirst, and restlessness.
2. **Phlegmatic Type (Balghami):** Salty, sticky mucus in the stool, mild discomfort.
3. **Melancholic Type (Saudavi):** Severe abdominal pain, black stool, restlessness, and fainting in extreme cases.
4. **Intestinal Irritation Type:** Mucus and sticky substances expelled with stool.

### Diagnosis of IBS

IBS is diagnosed through patient history and symptom patterns rather than specific tests. Doctors use the **Rome Criteria** to identify IBS while ruling out other conditions. Warning signs that may suggest other diseases include [1,2]:

- Age over 50
- Sudden weight loss
- Nighttime symptoms
- Family history of colon cancer
- Anemia
- Rectal bleeding

### Common tests include

**Blood Tests:** To rule out infections or deficiencies.

**Stool Tests:** To check for inflammation.

**Colonoscopy:** For patients over 40 or those with rectal bleeding.

### Rome Criteria for IBS

1. **Rome II Criteria**
  - Abdominal pain or discomfort for at least 12 weeks in the past year.
  - Pain must improve with defecation, change stool frequency, or alter stool appearance [2,4].

### 2. Rome III Criteria

- Symptoms occur at least 3 days a month over 3 months.
- Must be linked to relief after defecation, stool frequency change, or stool appearance change [1].

### 3. Rome IV Criteria

- Symptoms at least 4 days per month over 2 months.
- Must be linked to stool changes or relief after defecation.

### Unani Diagnosis [6]

Unani medicine assesses IBS based on stool characteristics and pain location. If mucus appears with stool, it suggests irritation in the intestines. The location of pain determines which part of the gut is affected:

- **Upper Intestine:** Pain near the stomach, anxiety, and minimal mucus.
- **Lower Intestine:** Pain below the navel with mucus passing before or with stool.
- **Rectum:** Mucus mixed with fatty particles.
- **Colon and Cecum:** Sticky mucus expelled.

### Management of IBS

#### General Treatment Approach

- Reassurance of the patients
- Removal of excess humour (*Khilt-e-Ghalib*).
- For the protection of power fruit juice should be prescribed.
- *Mugharri* (Mucoid), *Mughallizat* (Viscositive) drugs should be prescribed.
- Use of *Advia Qabiza* (Astringent drugs).
- *Gil-e-Makhtum* is useful in all types of Irritations (*Sehaj*).
- If the Irritations (*Sehaj*) are caused by the use of toxic drugs and strong purgative, then Enema (*Huqna*) of pure and fresh ghee of cow with *Damm-ul-akhwainis* beneficial.
- If the irritations (*Sehaj*) are in the upper part of the intestine (*Ama-e-Ulliya*) then Drinks (*Mashroobat*) should be prescribed, and if it is in the lower part of the intestine (*Ama-e-Sufila*) then Enema (*Huqna*) with *Mugharri* drugs is prescribed. If the irritation in between then both Drinks (*Mashroobat*) and Enema (*Huqna*) are used.
- *Muzalliq* (Lubricant) and *Mullayyin* (Laxative) drugs should be prescribed to remove the remnants (*Sufl*) [6,7].

## Treatment Options

### 1. *ILLAJ BIL GHIZA* (DIETOTHERAPY) [6,7,10,11]

Recommended foods: Pomegranate, grapes, spinach, cucumbers, mild spiced mutton curry, yogurt, rice, and soft khichdi.

- Avoid: Spicy food, meat, eggs, fish, vinegar, pickles, coffee, and acidic foods.

### 2. *ILLAJ BIL TADBEER* (REGIMENTAL THERAPIES)

Moderate exercise (walking, yoga, swimming) for at least 30 minutes daily [9].

- Avoid overexertion and excessive sun exposure.
- Massage therapy for relaxation [11].

### 3. *ILLAJ BIL DAWA* (PHARMACOTHERAPY) [12]

Common herbal prescriptions include:

- Jawarish Anarain (pomegranate tonic)
- Jawarish Mastagi (digestive aid)
- Sharbat-e-Anar (pomegranate syrup)
- Habb-e-Pappita (papaya-based pill)
- Sufoof-e-Muqliyasa (digestive powder)

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (*Sehj-e-Ama*) is a prevalent gastrointestinal disorder that significantly impacts patients' quality of life. The Unani system of medicine offers a holistic and individualized approach to its management by addressing both physical and psychological aspects. Through a combination of dietotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and regimental therapies, Unani medicine aims to restore the balance of humours, alleviate symptoms, and enhance overall well-being. The use of herbal medications, lifestyle modifications, and detoxification procedures not only provides symptomatic relief but also minimizes the risk of adverse effects associated with conventional treatments. The integration of traditional knowledge with modern scientific validation further enhances the therapeutic potential of Unani medicine, offering a promising alternative for the long-term management of IBS.

To our knowledge, only one open-label, single-arm clinical trial has been conducted to evaluate the efficacy of *Jawarish Shahi* in IBS [13]. However, no randomized clinical trials have been found to date. Therefore, rigorous prospective clinical studies are recommended to confirm the scientific validity of Unani formulations.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare to have no conflict of interest.

## Informed Consent and Ethical Statement

Not Applicable.

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