

## The relationship between the low food chemical diet and symptoms in irritable bowel syndrome: a cross-sectional survey

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Dietary therapies have revolutionised treatment for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). However, response rates to the diet with the highest evidence of efficacy (the low FODMAP diet) remain at 50-75%, suggesting other potential drivers of symptom onset. A low food chemical elimination-rechallenge diet targeting bioactive food chemicals (including salicylates, amines, glutamate and other additives), is commonly applied in Australia in patients exhibiting both gastrointestinal and extra-intestinal symptoms. One key food chemical, salicylate, has been shown to elicit symptoms in IBS patients with aspirin-sensitivity<sup>(1)</sup>, and 77% of IBS patients have reported amine-rich foods trigger symptoms<sup>(2)</sup>. However, data supporting the full low chemical diet is scant, and safety concerns exist due to its restrictive nature potentially causing nutritional deficiencies and disordered eating. This cross-sectional survey aimed to evaluate the frequency of co-existing extra-intestinal symptoms, as well as explore patient perceptions and use of the low chemical diet in those with IBS and healthy controls. Participants with IBS (IBS-Severity Scoring System (IBS-SSS) >75), and healthy controls (not meeting Rome IV and IBS-SSS ≤75) were recruited via online advertisement. Validated questionnaires were used to assess gastrointestinal symptoms (IBS-SSS), extraintestinal symptoms (extended PHQ-12), nutrient (Comprehensive Nutritional Assessment Tool) and food additive intake (IBD-Food additive questionnaire). Additional questionnaires assessed use of dietary therapies with specific focus on food chemicals. Data was analysed using independent samples t-test and chi-square test. 204 IBS (Total IBS-SSS, 277 ± 79) and 22 healthy controls (36 ± 28,  $p < 0.01$ ) completed the study. IBS participants were more likely to report extra-intestinal symptoms including headaches ( $p < 0.01$ ), migraines ( $p = 0.03$ ), fatigue ( $p < 0.01$ ), difficulty sleeping ( $p = 0.03$ ), rhinitis ( $p = 0.02$ ), urticaria ( $p = 0.04$ ) and mood disturbance ( $p < 0.01$ ). IBS participants were more likely to report at least one food chemical as a trigger for gastrointestinal (38% vs 13%,  $p = 0.03$ ) and/or extra-intestinal (30% vs 9%,  $p = 0.04$ ) symptoms. In the IBS group, the most common suspected dietary triggers for gastrointestinal symptoms were salicylates (19%) followed by MSG (17%) and artificial colours (14%); while for extra-intestinal symptoms, MSG (15%) was most common, followed by amines (14%), and sulphites (12%). There was no significant difference in consumption of ultra-processed, additive containing foods. Twenty-one (10%) IBS participants were following a low chemical diet, with dietary advice provided by a dietitian ( $n = 13$ ), general practitioner ( $n = 6$ ), gastroenterologist ( $n = 6$ ), naturopath ( $n = 3$ ), family/friend ( $n = 4$ ) and/or the diet was self-initiated ( $n = 7$ ). Fourteen of the 21 (67%) reported following both a low food chemical and low FODMAP diet. Patients with IBS are more likely to report extra-intestinal symptoms compared to healthy controls. Despite limited evidence, a low food chemical diet is utilised to manage both gastrointestinal and extra-intestinal symptoms. Of concern, many respondents following a low food chemical diet reported also following a low FODMAP diet, which may have implications for nutritional adequacy.

**Keywords:** dietary therapy; disorders of gut-brain interaction; extra-intestinal symptoms; bioactive food chemicals

### Ethics Declaration

Yes

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### References

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