DIGESTIVE HEALTH CENTER AT NORTHWESTERN MEDICINE
FUNCTIONAL BOWEL PROGRAM

The Northwestern Medicine Functional Bowel Program was established in 2006 and re-invigorated in 2010 with the goal of providing innovative and comprehensive care for patients with functional bowel disorders such as IBS, dyspepsia, gastroparesis, bloating, intestinal pseudo obstruction, constipation, and fecal incontinence. Functional bowel disorders are disabling, painful, and embarrassing conditions that affect up to 20 percent of the adult population and are second only to the common cold for patients who see a doctor for evaluation. Unfortunately, there are few highly effective medical or surgical therapies for the full range of symptoms, which include abdominal pain or cramping, nausea, vomiting, bloating and/or distention, diarrhea, constipation, fecal urgency, incomplete evacuation, and fecal incontinence.

Functional bowel disorders, therefore, represent a significant burden to the healthcare system and significantly impact a person’s quality of life. At Northwestern, we take a comprehensive approach to optimizing care for these patients. Through our Functional Bowel Program within the Digestive Health Center, we emphasize multidisciplinary diagnostic and treatment strategies, incorporating the most cutting-edge instrumentation with therapies ranging from traditional medicines to highly evidence-based complementary and alternative therapeutics.

Diagnostic Innovations

We are spearheading and utilizing the following breakthrough diagnostic innovations for the benefit of our patients.

**Anorectal Manometry (ARM):** Anorectal manometry is a diagnostic tool that is used to evaluate the mechanical function of the pelvic floor musculature. It is considered a first-line diagnostic for the assessment of chronic constipation and fecal incontinence. At Northwestern, our Functional Bowel team has access to the most advanced ARM software and technology, including both high-resolution and 3-D high-definition catheters.

**Wireless Motility Capsule:** The wireless motility capsule (Smartpill®) is a recently FDA-approved technology for the evaluation of gastrointestinal motility. After being swallowed, this unique device sends radiofrequency signals to a data recorder worn during testing. The capsule measures temperature, pressure, and pH readings throughout the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, allowing us to determine gastric emptying and small bowel, colon, and whole gut transit times.

**Breath Testing:** Breath testing allows us to evaluate individuals for carbohydrate malabsorption syndromes. It can also be used to assess for the presence of Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) and small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO). Tests performed in our laboratory include glucose and lactulose hydrogen and methane breath testing for SIBO, urea breath testing for H. pylori, and carbohydrate testing for lactose, sucrose, and fructose intolerance.

“Northwestern Medicine is at the cutting-edge of care for Functional Bowel Disorders, as evidenced by its national reputation for having one of the few fully-integrated multidisciplinary care teams in the world.”

Laurie Keefer, PhD, Associate Professor of Medicine-Gastroenterology/Hepatology
Innovations in Treatment

At Northwestern, we pride ourselves for being on the cutting-edge of treatment innovation for functional bowel disorders. Our team has been integral in establishing and substantiating the efficacy of multiple therapies ranging from the use of probiotics and cognitive behavioral therapy for treating irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), to peripheral µ-opioid receptor antagonists for opiate-induced constipation, and hyaluronic acid/dextronomer bead (Solesta®) gel injections for fecal incontinence. Our team of gastroenterologists, colorectal surgeons, behavioral psychologists, nutritionists, and physical therapists work collectively to provide multidisciplinary interventions.

Behavioral Therapies

Nowadays, it is fairly well established that brain-gut dysregulation plays a critical role in the onset and maintenance of functional bowel symptoms. Further, in attempts to control their symptoms, patients with functional bowel disorders often engage in behaviors that actually make symptoms worse. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a type of behavior therapy focused on helping patients learn skills related to managing and reducing their abdominal pain or altered bowel habits. Our previous research has shown that CBT is very effective for at least 80 percent of refractory patients, or patients who are resistant to current treatments. Gut-directed hypnotherapy is another evidence-based intervention for functional bowel disorders. It can be used safely and comfortably with excellent results in a variety of patients.

Nutrition

Good nutrition is a critical part of health, and is particularly relevant for people with digestive problems who must follow specific nutrition plans. Under the direction of advanced practice GI dietician, Bethany Doerfler, RD, MS, we provide state-of-the-art nutrition counseling for a range of digestive diseases. Not only are we up-to-date on the latest GI-friendly diets, we have the necessary training and skills to optimize eating behaviors and help people limit their intake of foods that can aggravate the digestive tract.

“I am committed to providing the best available treatment to my functional bowel patients. Doing so absolutely requires a multidisciplinary approach that includes the optimal combination of medical, surgical, physical, and/or behavioral therapies, as well as nutritional consultation.”

Darren Brenner, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine-Gastroenterology/Hepatology
Northwestern Memorial HealthCare and Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine are seeking to impact the health of humankind through Northwestern Medicine. We aspire to be the destination of choice for people seeking quality healthcare; for those who provide, support, and advance that care through leading-edge treatments and breakthrough discoveries; and for people who share our passion for educating future physicians and scientists. Our commitment to transform healthcare and to be among the nation’s top academic medical centers will be accomplished through innovation and excellence.

Our Functional Bowel Program within our Digestive Health Center is successfully combining multispecialty clinical care with groundbreaking research—all with a goal to bring forth results that focus on and best serve people with digestive diseases and disorders.

We recognize that every positive contribution we have made to functional bowel care, research, and education has been made possible by donors who have entrusted us with their philanthropic support. We invite our loyal donors and interested friends to join us in advancing the Functional Bowel Program at Northwestern Medicine and ensuring our success through gifts of outright support and endowment. Philanthropy provides crucial funds to advance the research of our exceptional clinician-scientists and basic investigators, as well as support state-of-the-art care, the training of our next generation of experts, and community outreach. Specifically, we could benefit from donations supporting the ability for us to hire either a nurse practitioner or a behavior therapist to improve access to our services and cut down on wait times. We also would benefit from donations related to advancing our telehealth presence.

For more information about supporting the Functional Bowel Program, please contact:

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