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Prevalence of Irritable Bowel Syndrome and its Association with Perceived Stress Level at The International Islamic University Malaysia among Nursing Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to determine the prevalence of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and its association with perceived stress levels among nursing students at the International Islamic University Malaysia. **Methods:** A cross-sectional design was used in this study. A three-part questionnaire was used to gather data on stress levels and IBS symptoms. Part A posed questions on socio-demographic aspects. In part B, a Perceived Stress Scale was used to measure individuals' perceived stress. Part C used a questionnaire developed by the World Gastroenterology Organisation (WGO) with the support of Danone. **Results:** The response rate was 85.3%; out of 210 students, 171 completed the questionnaires. According to the results, there is a significant relationship between stress levels and IBS ($p < 0.006$), where students who experienced moderate stress (51.1, 88.3%) were more exposed to IBS (36.7%). There is no association between the characteristics of subjects with IBS and their level of stress ($p > 0.05$). **Conclusion:** The prevalence of IBS among the students in this study was roughly moderate. The frequency of moderate stress levels was high and there was a significant association with IBS. On the other hand, subject characteristics, e.g. smoking habits, were insignificantly associated with IBS and stress level (5%).

KEYWORDS: Prevalence, Irritable bowel syndrome, Perceived stress level

INTRODUCTION

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a disease that presents in different ways. The major symptoms of IBS are abdominal pain, bloated stomach, diarrhea and constipation (1). The frequency and intensity of IBS symptoms may vary from day to day, or even from month to month, and may cause distress and disruptions to people's everyday lives (2). Other symptoms that accompany the main symptoms are mucus stools, feeling of incomplete evacuation, urgency and incontinence, wind, nausea, vomiting and belching. Providing a set definition of IBS is difficult because IBS is a clinical diagnosis. The best way to identify IBS is by understanding its criteria (3). Some causes of IBS are psychological, such as stress, anxiety, and depression and some are physiological, such as dysregulation of brain-gut axis and gut motility. Stress is an external factor that affects the physiological and psychological wellbeing of a person, triggering a psychological response. IBS is the most common diagnosis made by gastroenterologists, where 12% of IBS patients visiting a primary care unit (4). Stress can be defined as a condition or feeling that is experienced when an individual feels that what is demanded of them is beyond their ability, or when they feel the situation they are beyond their control (5). Stress is a typical reaction to external stressors e.g. students facing heavy study

workloads. It is normal to experience stress when studying, but low resistance to stressors may lead to uncontrolled stress, which causes individuals to develop other illnesses (6). This cross-sectional study aims to determine the prevalence of irritable bowel syndrome and its association with perceived stress levels among nursing students at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

METHODS

A cross-sectional design was used in this study. This study has been approved by the Kulliyah (Faculty) of Nursing Research Committee (KNRC), and the IUM Research Committee (IRC). Before participating in the study, all participants were given a consent form to sign to show their voluntary participation in the study. A three-part questionnaire was used to gather data on stress levels and IBS symptoms. Part A posed questions on socio-demographic aspects such as gender, year of study, marital status, smoking status and lifestyle. In part B, a Perceived Stress Scale was used to measure individuals' perceived stress (7). The scale measures nonspecific perceived stress and has been used in many studies to assess the stressfulness of situations and the effectiveness of interventions. The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale which each participant marked with 0-4 from left to right, to compute the total assessment score; all scales were compiled and divided into three categories of stress levels: mild, medium, and high. Part C used a questionnaire developed by the World Gastroenterology Organisation (WGO) with the support of Danone (8). The scoring system of this questionnaire is as follows: a score of 25-30 means the participant is likely to be suffering from IBS. A score of 15-24 means the participant may suffer from IBS and a score below 15 indicates that the participant's

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