



Dear Colleague

What's new at Braemar?

A simple breath-test may identify the foods that make many people's lives miserable. The test will soon be offered by a Braemar gastroenterologist.



Breath tests are frequently synonymous with poor health choices. But a breath test to be offered by Braemar gastroenterologist Dr Jim Brooker will help many people live healthier lives.

The test identifies foods that are poorly absorbed by people suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), a debilitating

condition which can cause abdominal bloating, flatulence, pain, diarrhoea and constipation. The condition, which affects thousands of New Zealanders, occurs when the digestive system is unable to digest certain sugars in many foods.

Dr Brooker, a UK-trained gastroenterologist who has worked in New Zealand for 10 years, is to introduce at Braemar a breath test to identify some of the sugar components that cause the condition, thus enabling patients to modify their diets to eliminate the symptoms.

"Basically, we are looking to identify the foods that cause IBS. Previously, it was difficult to diagnose people's intolerance to certain sugar components. We based our diagnosis on our experience and on the absence of other conditions. A positive or negative result from the breath test will allow us to simplify the process of dietary eliminations.

You know whether to exclude certain food groups which cause the symptoms."

He says the procedure, which is gaining popularity in Australia, the UK and US, means some patients may be able to avoid going through more invasive procedures such as endoscopies.

The breath test is based on studies by Melbourne dietician Dr Sue Shepherd who developed the FODMAP diet in 1999.

FODMAP refers to a collection of molecules found in food that are poorly absorbed by some people. They are fructose (e.g. honey, apples and pears), lactose (e.g. milk, yoghurt and cheeses), fructans (e.g. wheat, rye, onions, asparagus, beetroot and garlic in large amounts), galactans (e.g. legume beans, lentils and chickpeas) and polyols (e.g. apples, apricots, mushrooms and avocados).

The research identified that the FODMAPs may be poorly absorbed by the small intestine and thus rapidly set upon and fermented by bacteria within the digestive system, producing an increase in gas production.

The breath test measures the presence of hydrogen, which is only produced by bacterial fermentation.

“Basically, it is similar to a breath-alcohol meter. It’s a hand-held device. You exhale into it and the tests are repeated over about two hours, three times a week after a period of fasting. We are looking for a rise in hydrogen above a cut-off level,” says Dr Brooker.

The test can measure the malabsorption of the two most common triggers of IBS – fructose and lactose. Around 50-60 per cent of patients have intolerance to these two. All patients will be assessed by a dietician.

“If you can identify intolerance to those two sugars – or lack of it – it rationalises your approach to diet. Without the test you have to have a blanket ban on FODMAP foods, which is more difficult to manage,” says Dr Brooker.

Once the trigger is identified, and eliminated from the diet, two out of three patients have a “significant positive response”, he says.

Dr Brooker says patients will initially be referred through a specialist to eliminate the possibility that patients may have conditions other than IBS.

He says it is hard for people to work out on their own what

triggers abdominal symptoms. “People sometimes diagnose themselves – or their friends diagnose them. Some figure out the triggers and eliminate those foods, but for many it is impossible. That’s why a dietitian is so important. It takes specialised dietary help to understand and produce an appropriate diet.”

He says self-diagnosis can also present risks. “People could attribute their symptoms to IBS when they have something more serious.”

Dr Brooker says while IBS is not life-threatening, it does affect quality of life “and in severe cases, it is up there with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and angina.”

“With young people it affects their social life, their professional life and their sex life.”

He says the condition is more common in women. Some studies have suggested incidences are increasing, but he says it is difficult to know whether that is the result of greater awareness of the condition.

A sizeable group of people with IBS will not have a FODMAP intolerance. “In some people it could be the after-effects of infection or it could be stress-related.”

Any person with persistent abdominal symptoms should see their GP and alarm symptoms such as bleeding; weight loss and severe pain should not be attributed to food.

The breath test will be offered at Braemar from this February.

Dr Jim Brooker

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Areas of Specialisation

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Specialist Training

Bachelor of Medicine Bachelor of
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Positions & Memberships

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