



# IBD Digest

## Welcome to UPMC's Inflammatory Bowel Disease and Behavioral Health Study!

We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has been on all of our minds over the last year. As vaccination efforts continue across the country, we wanted to take the time to address some questions the clinical and research teams have received.

**Please note that this article is for informational purposes only and should not be considered medical advice.** If you have specific questions about your medical care, you should talk to your care team for more information.

### How could COVID-19 affect me as someone with IBD?

Having IBD does not seem to increase the risk of contracting COVID-19. The virus spreads mainly through exhaling and inhaling particles that carry the virus. However, some IBD patients may take medications that affect their immune systems, which may impact risk for COVID-19. Current research suggests that individuals with IBD are not at an increased risk of contracting or developing more severe cases of COVID-19. Most medications used to treat IBD have not been associated with increased complications due to COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> [The Crohn's and Colitis Foundation](#) provides a comprehensive set of resources on their website, and your doctor will be able to provide the information most relevant to you.

### How effective are the COVID-19 vaccines?

COVID-19 vaccines decrease your risk of contracting the virus, spreading the virus, and experiencing severe disease complications. Like any other new medical treatment, these vaccines underwent clinical trials to prove their safety and efficacy. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) only approves treatments and vaccines that are proven to benefit study populations. Keep in mind that no vaccination eliminates all risk of contracting COVID-19. It is still important to continue to adhere to recommended preventive measures even after being vaccinated. Doing so will protect you and those around you, especially those who have not been or cannot be vaccinated.

### Where can I learn more about getting a COVID-19 vaccination?

COVID-19 vaccines are now open to everyone 12 years of age or older nationwide. You can find information on when and where you can be vaccinated by going to [vaccinefinder.org](https://vaccinefinder.org). This website is run by various organizations, including the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Harvard Medical School. If you have a primary care provider, you can contact their office to ask if and when they will be offering vaccinations.

### STUDY PROGRESS

As of May 27, 2021,  
we have enrolled

# 249

participants across the  
three study locations!

We are 25 percent of the  
way to our goal.

### REMEMBER!

All participants are asked  
to complete a series of  
questionnaires at three points:

- Upon enrolling in the study
- Six months after enrolling
- One year after enrolling

You will be paid \$20 each for  
the initial and six-month  
questionnaires and \$40 for  
the final questionnaire.



1. Ungaro RC, Brenner EJ, Geary RB, et al. Effect of IBD medications on COVID-19 outcomes: results from an international registry. *Gut*. 2021 Apr;70(4):725-732. doi:10.1136/gutjnl-2020-322539

## Meet your dietitian

Nutrition plays a significant role in IBD treatment and symptom management. Each of our three study teams includes a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN). Read on to learn more about Therezia AlChoufete, MS, RDN, LDN, the Lead Dietitian for the UPMC Total Care—IBD Program.



### Therezia AlChoufete

MS, RDN, LDN; Lead Dietitian for UPMC Total Care—IBD Program

**What inspired you to become a dietitian?** My road to becoming a dietitian was not traditional—and it was not until well after I completed my neuroscience degree that I realized I wanted to become a dietitian. However, I've had a well-established passion for nutrition since childhood.

Like many young athletes, I had been immersed in nutrition and fitness for much of my life. When I began my undergraduate studies in pre-medicine, I was able to build on these experiences with scientific evidence, and I continued to focus on nutrition science in much of my academic work. Later on, I was fortunate enough to learn from and work with several medical and allied health disciplines that introduced me to the world of dietetics. It was then that I realized I wanted a career where I could help others use nutrition science as a way to improve their health while encouraging a positive relationship with food.

**What are some changes you've seen in your patients' diets or eating habits during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

The past year resulted in some interesting ideas about food. For many, stress was the primary factor in changes to eating habits. That might mean an increase in eating for some and a decrease for others. For many more, there was a focus on "healthy" eating in an attempt to optimize the immune system, about which I received many questions.

**What do you find most rewarding about your job?**

The ability to work with so many experts in the world of IBD is one of the most rewarding parts of my job. I have had the opportunity to learn from colleagues while truly making a difference in the lives of patients, and I feel very fortunate to be a part of this team.

**Tell us a fun fact about yourself.** I was a Zumba fitness instructor for five years and have taught classes at various gyms and fundraisers.

## Meet the research staff

It takes a lot of people to carry out a research study: someone needs to manage, take care of regulatory matters, conduct patient interviews, and analyze the outcomes—and that's just the beginning. You might not get to meet everyone on the team, but we want to give you the chance to learn more about one of our frontline staff members. You've probably even interacted with her during your time in the study!



### Ashley Taylor

MLIS; Project Manager, UPMC Center for High-Value Health Care

**What is a typical day as a research coordinator for the IBD Study like?** I track and manage a lot of the day-to-day activities for the project, so it's always a bit different. Most days, I'm helping new people get signed up for the study, reaching out to let you know when it's time to complete your

follow-up surveys, and making sure that everyone gets paid. Beyond that, a typical day could involve a number of different projects, like assembling reports, putting together slides for meetings with our project partners, or working with the coordinators at our study sites to make sure the project is running smoothly.

**How did you get into the field?** I spent about a decade as a librarian before getting into the health research field! It seems like there would be a big difference, but there are a lot of parallels: organization, interaction with people, data management, and the ability to identify and analyze research outcomes are really important parts of each job.

**What do you enjoy most about your job?** I like getting to learn more about the different types of research currently going on to make health care more accessible. Hearing everyone's stories and helping develop innovative solutions to problems makes me feel like I'm really making a difference.

**If you had a choice between being invisible and flying, which would you choose and why?** Definitely flying. I'm a big traveler (at least I was pre-2020!), and being able to get myself from place to place without needing to wait in an airport sounds like a dream.

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DISCLAIMER: All statements in this newsletter, including its findings and conclusions, are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), its Board of Governors or Methodology Committee.

## TIPS

### Getting started with physical activity

Information provided by Therezia AlChoufete, MS, RDN, LDN; Lead Dietitian for the UPMC Total Care—IBD Program, and Laura Manning, MPH, RDN, CDN; Dietitian at Susan and Leonard Feinstein IBD Clinical Center, Mount Sinai Hospital

Can the well-known benefits of physical activity help patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)? Low- to moderate-intensity exercise appears to be safe for patients with mild to moderate IBD. It may help to improve aspects of physical and mental well-being, including energy levels, muscle mass, bone health, inflammation, sleep, and mood. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

**Q: How much exercise should I get?**

**A: Check with your provider to determine the right goal for you.**

Some recommendations suggest aiming for 120-300 minutes (two to five hours) of moderate-intensity exercise **or** 75-150 minutes (one and a half to two and a half hours) of vigorous-intensity exercise per week. Things like walking, swimming, and mowing the lawn all count! Trying to add strength training at least two times per week is also a good goal. This can be done on weight machines, with resistance bands, with bodyweight, or by going outdoors to hike or rock climb. It's OK to get creative, but make sure to discuss any new activity you're considering with your doctor.

**Q: How can I get started?**

**A: Slow and steady wins the race.**

Start with small, measurable goals, and work your way up slowly. Be sure to listen to your body in the process. You can start by walking up and down the hallway of your apartment or driveway at your house. Try beginning with 10 minutes a day for three consecutive days and increasing from there. Don't forget: It's OK to take breaks! You can try to spread out the exercises throughout the day instead of completing them all at once if you find it more manageable.



**Q: What do I need to know to stay safe?**

**A: Check in with yourself and your provider(s).**

Are you feeling fatigued? Any urgency getting in your way? Have you noticed unintentional weight loss? These are signs that you may not want to increase your activity right now. It's important to check in with your gastroenterologist right away if you experience any changes in your health. Speaking a GI-focused dietitian or psychosocial GI professional can help you combat any barriers related to nutrition status or behavioral health that may arise on your physical activity journey.



## Contact

If you have any questions, please contact a member of the research team at 412-208-5235 or email us at [IBDStudy@upmc.edu](mailto:IBDStudy@upmc.edu). We can help you:

Address concerns about your Vincent Payment Card.

Update your contact information.

Resolve issues you may be having with the RxWell app.

Schedule a time to complete your follow-up questionnaires.