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Gut Guru Heather Van Vorous

By Kay Daly

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Heather Van Vorous was 9 years old when it first struck.

"It was summer vacation and I was at a friend's house," Heather recalls. "Suddenly, I blacked out with pain." Heather remembers being completely immobilized by a searing ache in her gut. She tried to call her friend's name but couldn't form the words.

Her parents sought medical attention immediately, but Heather's pediatrician didn't share their concerns. After a cursory examination, the doctor told Heather it was all in her head, and instructed her to "stop whining." The crippling pains recurred, and Heather returned to the doctor again and again, only to receive the same dismissive response. Despite her parents' pleas, the physician refused to refer Heather to a gastrointestinal specialist, and because her family belonged to an HMO, they couldn't seek a second opinion.

It was seven years before anything changed. At age 16, Heather was able to leave pediatric care and graduate to a general practice doctor. Her new physician took her concerns seriously and gave her a diagnosis: Heather had **Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)**.

Heather was initially relieved. Her ongoing pain was real, and it had a name. But as with most IBS sufferers, Heather's suffering was far from over. It would be years before she learned how to get her IBS under control. But in doing so, she would pioneer a whole new treatment approach and create a successful career as an IBS expert and author.

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Reaching out

While Heather had found relief, she still felt isolated. "I thought I was the only one in the world who had these problems." It wasn't until she went online that she discovered she was far from alone. In chat groups and on message boards, she discovered a huge community of IBS sufferers, all reporting the same complaints and eager for any advice on how to relieve their symptoms.

Heather sympathized with her fellow sufferers, and began posting responses on the message boards, giving out advice based on her own experience. By 1998, she'd developed a long e-mail that compiled her tips, and posted a message offering to send it to anyone who wanted it. "I was immediately overwhelmed with responses," she recalls.

Soon, Heather began including recipes along with her dietary and lifestyle guidelines. "So often, people would say, 'You've taken away my whole diet,' when I'd send them my guidelines," she recalls. "And I thought, 'But there's still plenty to eat.' I was a good cook and had lots of great recipes."

Eventually, Heather's collection of IBS became too much for a single e-mail. "My document was just too large. I was crashing people's e-mail systems!" she says with a laugh.

Friends urged her to turn her insights into a book, but Heather was hesitant. "I assumed there would already be good books out there with dietary advice," says Heather. "But after I looked around, I realized there weren't any. There were only a few books, and they were terrible. They had horrible advice. So I started to think maybe this would be a good book."

Heather's first book was *Eating for IBS*. It outlined her basic dietary guidelines and offered a full cookbook of IBS-friendly recipes. She followed it up with *The First Year: IBS*, a comprehensive guide to the ailment. Her original e-mail eventually evolved into an **extensive website** that now supports one of the largest online IBS support communities.

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A healthy career

For Heather, IBS has gone from a debilitating ailment to a challenge to be overcome, to an entrepreneurial opportunity. Although she had never intended to make a career out of her expertise, she's found a healthy market for the information and advice she provides. With her husband Will, Heather heads up Heather & Company, LLC, a company that seeks to provide information and services to IBS sufferers. Her books have received rave reviews from patients and their doctors, and her website receives more than 1.8 million visits per year. She's received accolades from health and diet organizations, and Heather was nominated for a "Woman of Strength Award" by [Oxygen.com](#).

Heather has also found her work accepted and endorsed by many in the medical profession. "I was worried at first about how doctors would respond," Heather admits. But after distributing information at a conference for gastrointestinal specialists, her perspective changed. Many doctors, she's found, are just as frustrated as their patients with the difficulties in treating IBS. "They were ecstatic to have the information," Heather recalls. One former IBS sufferer, a doctor in Calgary, has had such success with Heather's guidelines that he's conducting a study on the effectiveness of her dietary and lifestyle advice.

But for Heather, the true sign of her success is the response she gets from her readers. Her site documents the testimonials she's received from IBS patients who've finally found relief because of her work. It's a heart-warming experience for a woman who thought for years that she suffered alone.

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