

**We are here to help you.**

## **The power of food:** Fuelling great mental health



We're taking a closer look at how what we eat can impact our mental wellbeing, in particular exploring the link between our gut health and mental health. Often referred to as the 'second brain', our digestive system can affect our immunity and resilience to stress, both of which can affect our mood through what is known as the gut-brain connection.

With thanks to Jo Williams and Aurea Fellows, nutritional therapist and occupational psychologist, who have discussed the connection between good gut health and mental health, the role the body plays in this and tips on some changes or additions you might make to your diet to keep promote a positive mind, energy and physical wellbeing.

### What exactly do we mean by gut health?

When you hear the term 'gut health', it's referring to your digestive system, also known as your gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Your gut is where your body digests food, absorbs energy and nutrients, and gets rid of waste products. It goes all the way from your mouth to your back passage and also includes your throat, food pipe, stomach and intestines.

### Why focus on gut health?

The health of our gut is very important in supporting our physical and mental health in a myriad of ways. Beyond its role in extracting nutrients from food and therefore nourishing the rest of the body, it also contains a large percentage of the immune system and produces a vast array of different hormones and chemicals which have an impact on our health.

### What have gut bacteria got to do with it?

The bacteria living in our gut play a central and integral role in how our gut functions. We have a complex symbiotic relationship with these bacteria that scientists are now starting to discover has a lot of implications for our health. Connections have now been found between the health of our gut bacteria and conditions like type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, as well as allergies like eczema and autoimmune conditions such as ulcerative colitis and psoriasis. Increasingly, the evidence is also pointing towards a role for gut bacteria in mental wellbeing, including anxiety and depression.

Basically, our health is closely linked to their health and we can optimise our health and well-being by making their lives better.

### Key terms

#### Bacteria/microbes

Also known as gastrointestinal microbiota or gut flora. The term microbiota refers to a group of microorganisms that inhabit a certain environment, in this case the gastrointestinal system.

#### Symbiotic relationship

A close, co-operative relationship between two organisms which interact in a way that benefits them both.

#### Prebiotic/probiotic

Prebiotics and probiotics both support the body in building and maintaining a healthy colony of bacteria and other microorganisms, which supports the gut and aids digestion.

Both probiotics and prebiotics work to promote a healthier microbiome, for the gut, mouth, or on the skin. The difference is that, while probiotics, often referred to as 'good' or 'friendly' bacteria are known to be beneficial to the body, prebiotics are nutrients that promote the growth of the good bacteria that already exist in or on your body whilst helping to fend off the 'bad' bacteria



### Did you know...

- We have over 100 trillion bacteria in our guts. That's more cells than in the average human body, with a combined weight of about 2 kg – that's heavier than the brain!
- The microbes living in our gut form a complex ecosystem with more diversity than you would find in a rainforest.
- Estimates are that 90% of our nutrition come from food but the other 10% comes via our gut bacteria
- Some important antioxidants in so called 'super foods' are largely useless to us until then are converted by our gut bacteria
- Our gut bacteria can either help or hinder when it comes to regulating our weight and appetite
- Beneficial bacteria produce substances that support the health of the gut, lower inflammation and improve our mood
- Too many harmful bacteria in our gut contributes to chronic inflammation, an enhanced response to stress and a range of knock-on effects in the body including our mental wellbeing
- Our gut bacteria use the nervous system to communicate directly with the brain and can 'reward' us for eating what they need to survive – are you reaching for the sugary treat or is it because they want you to?

## **You can support the health of your gut bacteria through the types of food and drink you include in your diet – here are a few tips to get you started**

### **Eat a wide variety of plant fibres**

Try to make your diet as diverse as possible to support the diversity of the bacteria in your gut. A range of vegetables, fruit, wholegrains, nuts and seeds, beans and pulses, as well as herbs and spices, all add to that diversity and are a great place to start!

### **Include prebiotic fibres in your diet**

These provide food specifically for the beneficial bacteria. They're really easy to incorporate - think things like onions, leeks, garlic, asparagus, artichokes, apples and seaweed to name some. They're all good sources.

### **Resistant starch**

Is starch that passes through the small intestine without being digested hence being 'resistant'. Instead, the fibers pass through to the large intestine where they provide food for your gut bacteria. Resistant starch is another good prebiotic. Green bananas, raw oats, nuts and seeds, beans and pulses are all good options.

Cooked and cooled rice and potatoes are another way to increase our levels of resistant starch.

### **Introduce probiotics**

Food and drink that contain live forms of beneficial bacteria known as probiotics can also support the diversity and balance in your gut bacteria. Include foods like live yoghurt, blue cheese, kimchi (a Korean classic side dish), and sauerkraut, as well as drinks like kombucha and kefir which you can find in some supermarkets as well as health stores.

Top tip - look for non-pasteurised products with a range of different strands of bacteria.

### **Ward off sugar cravings**

Too much sugar and processed foods can be unhelpful. When you feel like going to the biscuit tin, you might want to try and make some mindful swaps. But remember – it's all about balance!

### **Slow and steady wins the race!**

Gradually increase the level of fibre and prebiotics in the diet to nudge the overall balance of bacteria in the right direction. Experiment with a range of different foods to see what works best for you. Once you've got started, you may like to challenge yourself to include 30 different plant foods of different colours into your diet every week! Veggie box subscriptions can be a great way to experiment.

### **A word about supplements!**

There are supplemental forms of both prebiotics and probiotics. As with getting these from food it is best to start slow and gradually build up.

With a probiotic supplement look for one containing multiple different strains of bacteria (at least 6) and that lists the specific substrains and amount of bacteria that the product contains.

Probiotic supplements are not advised if you are pregnant, have recently had surgery or have a compromised immune system.

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