

Nutrition and Mental Health: What's the Connection?



Not surprisingly, the food you eat impacts both your mind and your body.

Thanks to a new field of research called nutritional psychiatry, new studies are showing a stronger link between nutrition and mental health.

Studies are revealing connections between good gut health and how the immune system responds. Research also points to the fact that bad gut health not only leads to poor mental health but also increases risk of other health conditions.

Our gut health is impacted by what we eat. In turn, when you consume the right foods, it releases the “happy hormone” known as serotonin. Appropriate levels of this neurotransmitter

keeps your mood elevated, sleep patterns on track, and overall health going in the right direction.

Curious about how to keep your gut and mind happy?

Below, we share the most recent findings and include details on foods to keep you feeling physically and mentally well.

Here's a look at how good nutrition can help your mental health:

What's the Link Between Nutrition and Mental Health?

Inside the gut is where about 95% of the body's serotonin is made. This chemical is what regulates mood, sleep, and hunger. When the gut isn't fed the appropriate wholesome foods, it loses the diversity of its much-needed bacteria. This, in turn, can reduce serotonin levels.

The importance of gut health to overall health is a topic of increasing research in the medical community. An imbalance of good and bad gut bacteria can lead to chronic diseases.

Examples of such diseases include:

- Asthma
- Anxiety
- Obesity
- Diabetes
- Depression
- Metabolic syndrome
- Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Most notably, though, is how food impacts mood.

A relatively new field of psychology called nutritional psychiatry has researchers looking into nutritional approaches to the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. As it turns out, a healthy gut with good bacteria influences digestion and has an impact on body inflammation, energy, and mood.

These researchers are learning more about the "gut microbiome," which refers to the trillions of microorganisms living in your intestines. There are 300 to 500 different species of bacteria in the digestive tract and it's important to have a wide variety of beneficial bacteria to have a healthy gut.

What Makes a Gut Healthy?

As previously mentioned, the gut microbiome requires a delicate balance of bacteria, viruses, and fungi. You're first exposed to microbes when you're born. Research indicates the first 1,000 days of life is when a person's unique gut microbiome develops.

Because of the gut's bacterial diversity, it's important to have a wide variety of beneficial bacteria to maintain a healthy gut and mental state.

When this gets out of whack and for too long, it can cause a variety of chronic health conditions, including depression or anxiety. Antibiotics and/or a lack of a healthy, well-rounded diet may contribute to a gut health imbalance.

Good bacteria create a strong barrier against toxins and "bad" bacteria. It also limits inflammation, helps you absorb nutrients, and activates neural pathways that link the gut and the brain.

The foods you eat throughout your life impact how diverse your gut microbiome is. A healthy diet low in processed foods and refined sugars is healthier for your gut and overall health.

What's the Gut-Mood Connection?

Serotonin is the hormone that impacts everything from emotions to motor skills. It's also considered a natural mood stabilizer.

The amount of serotonin and other neurotransmitters produced is impacted by the health of your gut microbiome. A serotonin shortage may cause low energy and other psychological concerns.

Serotonin deficiency may also be associated with psychological issues like:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Aggression
- Insomnia
- Irritability
- Poor memory
- Low self-esteem
- Impulsive behavior

The above health concerns highlight the mental health reasons good gut health matters. Those may also be amplified if you physically feel unwell due to poor diet. Next time you reach for a

bowl full of the office candy (day after day) or head to the drive-through, consider how your mental health may suffer.

Some other facts that back up the importance of good gut health:

- **A good gut microbiome means less inflammation** - A healthy gut also reduces inflammation in the body. If your gut is unhealthy, your physical and mental health is likely to suffer. Research shows inflammation has been linked to depression and may explain why traditional antidepressants aren't always successful.
- **Whole foods may help mood** - Studies have shown whole food helps. Healthy diets like the Mediterranean diet may reduce the risk of depression by 25-35% over diets full of processed foods and sugar.
- **A poor diet can lead to brain fog** - Another brain and nutrition link is "brain fog" which is when you feel confused, disoriented, less "sharp." This may also be related to a poor diet or dehydration
- **"Antidepressant foods" may help** - A study published in 2018, outlines an Antidepressant Food Scale of 12 antidepressant nutrients related to the prevention and treatment of depression. Some of the foods containing these nutrients are oysters, mussels, salmon, watercress, spinach, romaine lettuce, cauliflower, and strawberries.
- **Eat well to reduce inflammation** - Eating a healthy, balanced diet like the Mediterranean diet and avoiding inflammatory foods could potentially protect against depression.

Foods for Thought for a Happy Gut

The most obvious step to a healthy gut is eating a healthier diet. One that includes more whole foods and less processed foods. Additionally, reducing sugar and fat, including lean meats, and opting for high-fiber foods can be helpful.

A few other foods and ideas to try out:

- **Probiotic-rich foods** - Plain yogurt without added sugars and fermented drinks and foods such as kefir (unsweetened), sauerkraut, or kimchi may support gut health.
- **Drink lots of water** - Staying well-hydrated supports gut health as it keeps your digestive tract moving. Sugary waters and sports drinks don't count.
- **Enjoy your food** - Eating slowly and chewing thoroughly has been shown to improve absorption and support a healthy gut.
- **Focus on overall wellness** - Not getting enough sleep and being overstressed can also affect your gut health. Too much stress can also wreak havoc on sleeping patterns. Aim for 7-8 hours a night and incorporate relaxation methods to reduce stress.

It's important to note that while a better diet may help moods and overall health, don't forgo professional mental health help. When you combine therapy with lifestyle changes, it may be just what you need to get your overall nutrition and mental health back on track.