

## What's the Gut-brain Connection?

Scientific research indicates that gut health may play a bigger role in overall well-being than many people realize. In fact, research published in the National Library of Medicine (NLM) shows that a nervous system in the gut produces approximately 95% of the body's serotonin, which regulates mood, sleep, digestion and other critical functions. Commonly referred to as a "second brain," the gut's nervous system contains over 100 million nerve cells that line the gastrointestinal tract from the esophagus to the rectum, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine. This nervous system is likely the reason for feelings like "butterflies" in your stomach and explains why people sometimes feel nauseous when anxious or excited.

Crucially, the relationship between your mind and gut also impacts your mental and physical health. An unhealthy gut can contribute to mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depression, and vice versa. It can also contribute to the development of certain diseases.

### Understanding the Gut-brain Connection

Both the brain and the gut have neurons that tell the body how to behave. They also have neurotransmitters, which control feelings and emotions. Communication occurs through the vagus nerve, which connects the gut and the brain through the gut-brain axis. Scientists don't believe that the "second brain" in your gut is capable of thought; however, they've shown that it can communicate with your brain, producing significant results. For example, people with irritable bowel syndrome often experience big emotional shifts, such as mood changes, depression and anxiety.

### Signs of an Unhealthy Gut

The NLM reported that gut health is linked to the following conditions:

- Mental health issues
- A weak immune system

- Autoimmune diseases
- Cardiovascular diseases
- Endocrine diseases
- Gastrointestinal diseases
- Cancer

An unhealthy gut can impact your immune system, weight and hormones. It may also make you more susceptible to disease. Stress, lack of sleep, antibiotics and diet can negatively impact gut health.

### Improving Your Gut Health

A healthy gut may be associated with improved mental and physical health. Promote gut health with the following practices:

- **Manage your stress.** Chronic stress is hard on your gut. Reduce stress by meditating, spending time with family and friends, limiting alcohol consumption and getting counseling.
- **Get enough sleep.** Insufficient sleep can negatively impact your gut, which can cause more sleep issues. Prioritize getting seven to eight hours of uninterrupted sleep every night.
- **Drink plenty of water.** Hydration can increase the diversity of healthy bacteria in your gut and reduce the type of gut bacteria that cause gastrointestinal infections.

The connection between your gut and your brain significantly impacts your overall health. With certain lifestyle changes, such as a healthy diet and adequate stress management, you can reap the benefits of a healthy gut. Speak to your health care provider for more information on gut-healthy foods.