

Healthy Living

Recognize the gut-brain connection

Mood and well-being are not governed exclusively by the brain. Some may be surprised to learn that the gut plays an integral role in how one feels both mentally and physically. According to the National Institutes of Health, the close connection between the central nervous system and the gut explains why emotional stress can cause stomach pains, and why an imbalance in gut health can directly affect mood and cognition.

What is the gut-brain axis?

The Cleveland Clinic notes the gut-brain axis is a two-way biochemical and neural communication network linking the gastrointestinal tract and the central nervous system. Signals pass both ways between the digestive system and the CNS, and health or disease in one can affect the other. Anyone who has experienced butterflies in the stomach when nervous is experiencing this connection. More information passes between the brain and gut

than any other systems in the body, and there are more nerve cells in the gut than anywhere in the body outside of the brain. Scientists call these nerves the “little brain” or the enteric nervous system (ENS). The main link between the big brain and little brain is the vagus nerve.

What does the gut’s brain control?

The main role of the ENS is to control digestion. However, the ENS also may trigger big emotional shifts, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine. People with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and functional bowel problems like constipation can experience all sorts of emotional issues. For decades, researchers and doctors thought that anxiety and depression contributed to these problems. Now, studies show that it actually may be the other way around. Signals sent to the brain from the gut can trigger mood changes that make a person feel anxious or contribute to low mood. In fact, a vast majority of the

body’s serotonin, a neurotransmitter responsible for feelings of happiness and well-being, is produced in the gut.

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ach opens up new treatment options. Doctors may work together to help soothe the gut and the mind in concert. It’s not unheard of for gastroenterologists to prescribe treatments like antidepressants and cognitive behavioral therapy in addition

to acid-blocking medications and specialized diets.

Supporting the axis People can take steps to ensure their gut is healthy and promote general well-being. Focusing on whole foods, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is essential. Foods like yogurt, sauerkraut

and kimchi can help populate the gut with beneficial bacteria. In addition, practices like yoga, therapy and mindfulness can calm the ENS and reduce GI distress.

The dynamic between the gut and brain is complex and can affect both physical and mental health.

The benefits of Pilates

Adults are not short on options when they seek ways to improve their overall physical health. Whether it’s signing up for a membership at a local fitness facility or riding a bicycle as part of a daily routine or going for a morning jog each day, there’s a lot people can do to incorporate more physical activity into their lives.

Each physical activity offers its own unique benefits, and the discipline known as Pilates can be great for individuals looking to reap a multitude of rewards. Pilates has an interesting origin story, as it was the brainchild of German-born emigré to England Joseph Pilates, who was interned on the Isle of Man upon the outbreak of World War I. Pilates, who was a sickly child but grew into an adult who was so physically fit he

taught self-defense to detectives at Scotland Yard, used his time in the internment camp to experiment with a new approach to exercise. Pilates’s tinkering was a nascent form of what’s now a popular approach to fitness that bears his name.

Pilates has attracted millions of people across the globe, and the many benefits of the approach are undoubtedly a big part of that allure.

• Pilates and back pain relief: The Hospital for Special Surgery notes that Pilates is a core-focused approach that can keep the back sturdy and help people alleviate back pain, particularly discomfort that affects the lower back. The Cleveland Clinic notes that lack of core strength can contribute to lower back pain, so it’s no surprise a core-focused approach

like Pilates can help people overcome lower back pain.

• Pilates and improved flexibility: Anyone who has ever engaged in a Pilates workout or watched others do so has likely noticed that the approach involves a lot of stretching. So it’s no surprise that Pilates helps to improve flexibility. And as the Cleveland Clinic notes, improving flexibility can minimize injury risk, as a body that’s flexible is less vulnerable to strains and pulls that can sideline athletes who do not incorporate stretching into their routines.

• Pilates and better balance: Improved balance is another benefit of Pilates. Pilates strengthens the lower back, hips and abdominal muscles, which helps to build a sturdy center that can help adults maintain their balance. That’s a particularly notable benefit for adults in middle age, as UCLA Health notes that balance begins to decline around age 50. By engaging with a core-focused approach like Pilates, adults can counter age-related loss of balance. And maintaining balance into older adulthood is especially beneficial, as it can reduce the risk for falls that can adverse-

ly affect older adults’ physical and mental health as well as their ability to continue to live independently.

• Pilates and body awareness: The Cleveland Clinic notes that Pilates encourages people to focus on their breathing and bodies. That emphasis can help them better understand their bodies, including their weaknesses and when something might be off. Such recognition may reduce injury risk because people will be better attuned when something is off than they otherwise might be. The fewer injuries physically active people suffer, the more they can continue to move about, which can serve as a safeguard against the many pitfalls of a sedentary lifestyle.

Pilates is an approach to physical fitness that can pay numerous dividends. Adults willing to give Pilates a shot are urged to begin that pursuit under the tutelage of an experienced instructor.

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