

Health Beat

HEALTH, MIND & BODY

UPMC Doctor: The Mind-Gut Connection



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We've all been there. That uneasy feeling you get deep in the pit of your stomach. Stress and anxiety may be to blame for this feeling you can't explain. It's a what is referred to as the mind-gut connection and it may affect your physical and mental health.

The Science Behind the Connection

Your digestive system has its own nervous system (enteric nervous system), which operates independently of your central nervous system. The enteric nervous system (ENS) is embedded in the lining of your gastrointestinal system. The ENS talks to your central nervous

system through the vagus nerve, the nerve that controls your fight or flight response.

The ENS's main role is controlling your digestion. It sends signals to swallow, break down food with enzymes, and control the blood flow that helps with nutrient absorption.

The brain can send signals to the ENS through the vagus nerve which is what that uneasy feeling you can't put your finger on is. The ENS also sends signals to the brain which can be the bloated feeling or pain from an infection in your gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

How Can This Connection Affect Your Health?

Mental health distress is strongly associated with GI symptoms such as heartburn, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, and acid reflux.

People with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) — which affects your large intestine or colon

— frequently suffer from anxiety and depression. Your colon responds to stress, so it makes sense that anxiety and depression can worsen your IBS. On the flip side, if you don't control IBS symptoms, your stress increases, and your mental health can decline. It is a vicious cycle for many people.

With 30 to 40% of the population having functional bowel problems at some point in their lives, this research could help a lot of people. While we learn more about the connection, it is important to take care of both your GI disorder and your related mental health issues.

Tips for a Healthy Mind-Gut Connection

The key to a healthy connection is a balanced approach so you'll need to treat both your mind and your gut. Here are some tips to keep your connection healthy:

- Eat a balanced and nutritious diet. Add high-fiber foods

to grow the good bacteria in your gut, including barley, oats, wheat, and rye. Raw or steamed vegetables such as onions, tomatoes, and asparagus are also beneficial.

- Add fermented foods such as yogurt, kimchi, kombucha, and sauerkraut to add live microorganisms to your gut, helping grow good bacteria.
- Limit antibiotics to only when you really need them or as directed by your doctor. Antibiotics are not needed to fight viral infections such as the cold or flu.
- Reduce stress by adding meditation, breathing exercises, and yoga to your daily routine. These activities have been shown to decrease your body's stress response, improve mood, and decrease GI symptoms.

- Get a good night's sleep. Sleep can help you lower your body's overall stress load and help you produce more serotonin, a calming hormone that stabilizes mood.

Each person's situation is unique, so it's important that you discuss any GI issues or mental health concerns you may have with your primary care provider. Your provider can determine if you need additional help

from a specialist who can work with you to develop a personalized treatment plan.

Stacy Prall, DO, gastroenterologist, practices at the UPMC Digestive Disease Center in Williamsport and Muncy. If you have a gastrointestinal disorder, contact the UPMC Digestive Disease Center at 570-321-3454. For more information, visit UPMCSusquehanna.org.

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