

Have you got the Guts? Looking after your mental well-being through food

Julie Meek, Accredited Practising Dietitian

If you have diabetes and reading this right now, I understand that there is much to think about to keep yourself healthy and well. This in turn, can impact on your mental health. There are many ways we can tackle the management of our mental wellbeing but one that you may not have thought about is gut health.

Gut health has never been more topical and the connection between our gut, broader health and our brain is becoming increasingly clearer as time goes on.

Emerging research is showing promising evidence of the link between the gut and mood disorders such as depression and anxiety. This research suggests that those suffering these conditions have some gut bacteria in common.

Aside from these findings, we know that the gastrointestinal tract is responsible for producing 80-90% of serotonin – our happy hormone. Disturbance to our gut can affect the production of serotonin, which can have a major impact on our mood and therefore our mental health in the longer term.

What is the Microbiome?

The gut microbiome refers to the different microorganisms living in our gastrointestinal tract, including bacteria, viruses, yeast, parasites and fungi. There are 38 trillion microbiota in our microbiome, most of which live in our large intestine or colon. If we lay our intestines flat – it would be large enough to cover the area of a tennis court!

Both good and bad bacteria live side by side in our intestinal tract. I often imagine them having a punch up....

Like our fingerprints, we each have a unique gut microbiome colonised by approximately 160 bacterial species but we only share a small number of these with each other. The function of the microbiota is not completely understood but research is showing us that if we look after our internal environment, we increase the good bacteria in our gut and this can have a substantial impact on our physical and mental well-being.

Good bacteria produce compounds, which are important for our health. These compounds can:

- ✓ Improve the absorption of nutrients from our food
- ✓ Reduce inflammation
- ✓ Strengthen our immunity - 90% of our immune function is in our gut and alterations to our gut wall can result in inflammation, irritation and 'leaky' gut. This allows undigested food and toxins to flood into the bloodstream
- ✓ Regulate our mood
- ✓ Protect against cancers, particularly of the bowel

Less diversity or numbers of good bacteria can mean that the 'bad' bacteria can take over and this can lead to inflammation in our bodies.

What are probiotics?

Probiotics are live bacteria that are naturally found in our gut and in some foods. They improve our health by reducing the number of harmful bacteria that may survive in our gut. We can add good communities of microbes to our gut by eating fermented foods high in good bacteria or probiotics such as:

- Yoghurt with live cultures – look for 1 billion probiotics per serve (CFU's)
- Kefir - fermented milk or water-based drink that usually has around 30 beneficial strains of good bacteria
- Kombucha - fermented black or green tea drink
- Fresh kimchi - Korean fermented vegetables
- Fresh sauerkraut -fermented cabbage

What about prebiotics?

Prebiotics are very different to probiotics. Prebiotics are mostly soluble fibres and resistant starches that act as fuel for our good bacteria in the large intestine or colon. They are fermented by gut bacteria and boost the balance of our microbiome to be healthier. Some foods that are naturally high in prebiotics, include:

Vegetables – Cooked then cooled potato, leek, asparagus, garlic, onion

Fruit – Green banana, apples, pears, watermelon, nectarines, dried fruit (e.g. dates, figs)

Wholegrains – Barley, rye, wheat, oats, lupin

Legumes – Chickpeas, lentils, red kidney beans, baked beans, soybeans

Nuts – Cashews, pistachio nuts

Heads Up: Try adding some of these pre and probiotic's to your daily intake for a healthy gut and brain. All this extra fibre is very helpful with blood sugar control but don't forget to add plenty of water to assist all this fibre getting through your intestinal tract!

About Julie Meek

With more than 15 years experience in public, sports and corporate nutrition, Julie Meek knows how good food can get bodies buzzing

Julie spent five years as the Dietitian to the Fremantle Dockers Football Club (Australian Football League) and the Perth Wildcats Basketball team. Julie is now a professional speaker and also works with the athletes at the Western Australian Institute of Sport. She has helped thousands of people achieve personal success through eating well.

To back up this practical experience, Julie is degree qualified in nutrition and health promotion and is an Accredited Practising Dietitian and accredited member of the National Speakers Association Australia. Julie is the nutrition and performance expert with a regular segment on radio 6PR and is the author of 'truth, lies and chocolate.'

Julie's passion is to equip and empower individuals, teams and businesses to experience peak performance through nutrition.

Find out more about Julie at juliemeek.com.au