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The Binge Eating Prevention Plan

EATING DISORDERS

9 Tips for Improving the Gut–Brain Connection

What you eat can improve your digestion and mood—and reduce disordered eating.

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Reviewed by Michelle Quirk



KEY POINTS

- The gut–brain axis is a vital modulator to whole-body health, regulating emotions, cognitive functioning, digestion, and more.
- The gut–brain axis is bidirectional, meaning that nutrition interventions may support recovery from mental health conditions.
- Psychological interventions may help reduce symptoms in gastrointestinal and other health conditions.



Source: AaronAmat/istockphoto

By Gia Marson Ed.D.

With new findings regarding the gut–brain axis, we’re closer to understanding just how connected we truly are on the insides. The gut and

brain communicate through the vagus nerve, which is part of the parasympathetic nervous system. This connection is known as the gut–brain axis, and it enables the two organs to receive and send signals to each other. This communication helps regulate emotions, cognitive functioning, digestion, and other bodily functions.

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While the gut–brain connection means that proper nutrition may result in substantial improvements to mental as well as physical health, disturbances to either side of the axis may contribute to problems. Both eating disorders and anxiety produce physiological imbalances that alter the amount and composition of gut microbiota, the microorganisms that live in the gut.

There are many ways to positively modulate this relationship. Here are nine tips to improve your gut–brain connection and support a healthier way of living.

1. Eat a variety of foods.

Eating a wide variety of plant-based foods (such as vegetables, whole grains, fruits, legumes, and nuts), along with regular consumption of fish, poultry, and dairy products,

increases microbial diversity in the gut while providing a range of nutrients (such as omega fatty acids and antioxidants) that improve overall brain health. Research shows that foods typically consumed by those living in the Mediterranean region are especially beneficial to the gut microbiota and the brain. In particular, fruits and vegetables contain a group of compounds called polyphenols, which may decrease inflammation and offer neuroprotective benefits. When it comes to protein, studies demonstrate that adequate protein consumption promotes an abundance of good bacteria in the gut while reducing pathogen numbers. Amino acids, which are the building blocks of protein, play an important role in the production of neurotransmitters such as GABA, serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, all of which are essential for brain function.

2. Take probiotics.

Recent studies indicate that patients with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder, or anxiety show an imbalance in gut microbiota, which help with immune and metabolic functioning and weight regulation. When they become imbalanced, our immune system response isn't as strong and we experience inflammation, which can be a precursor to disease. Fortunately, probiotics can help. These live microorganisms are comparable to the good bacteria found naturally in the stomach. Probiotics may help with better digestion, vitamin generation, improved motility and cognitive function, and reduced inflammation. Ask a licensed dietitian for specific recommendations.

3. Improve your mental health.

Research suggests that the gut–brain axis is bidirectional. This means that nutrition interventions may support recovery from mental health conditions, and psychological

interventions may help reduce symptoms in gastrointestinal and other health conditions. Neurons and neurotransmitters are found in both the brain and gut, so feelings of happiness or anxiety, for example, could be triggered through the gut.

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4. Treat IBS.

There's a high correlation between irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and anxiety. In some studies, participants with anxiety showed lower microbial richness. The thinking, then, is by improving the health of the gut, we also improve mental health (and lessen IBS symptoms). Interestingly, antidepressants may also help reduce some of the symptoms of IBS; a study of adolescents with newly diagnosed IBS found that the antidepressant amitriptyline significantly reduced symptoms and increased overall quality of life.

5. Reconnect and experience a sense of safety.

Stress impacts the gut barrier and gut microbiota, while trauma can have a negative impact on eating habits and the gut itself. For example, there is good evidence that individuals who have experienced trauma are more vulnerable to binge-eating disorder. Additionally, research

shows that an individual who experienced early traumatic experiences may be more vulnerable to changes in the composition of their microbiome and the nervous system:

✓ THE BASICS

What Are Eating Disorders?

[Find a therapist to heal from an eating disorder](#)

Long-lasting immune consequences and [an] increase [in] the risk of developing stress-related disorders later in life. —Leclercq, et al.

6. Meditate.

Meditation is often used as part of treatment for eating disorders, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. But new research shows added promise for meditation's potential positive impact on the gut–brain axis, by altering the composition of the gut microbiome. A study of 37 male Tibetan monks and control subjects concluded that

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The specific microbiota enriched in monks was

associated with a reduced risk of anxiety, depression and cardiovascular disease and could enhance immune function. Overall, these results suggest that meditation plays a positive role in psychosomatic conditions and well-being. –Sun et al.

7. Rule out viral and bacterial infection.

EATING DISORDERS ESSENTIAL READS



**Could Exercise
Be a Tool in
Eating Disorder
Recovery?**



**To Avoid an
Eating Disorder,
Don't Start
Down the Path**

Viral or bacterial infections may precede the onset of stomach problems, including the onset of eating disorders. The infections and response from your immune system can lead to associated changes such as intestinal inflammation, intestinal permeability, appetite dysregulation, and decreased richness of gut microbiota. It is possible that adaptations in the gut may be physiologically helpful when healing from infection. However, when intestinal gut microbiota responses persist after the pathogen is no longer present, there may be an elevated risk of developing an eating disorder.

8. Get educated.

Being educated about the science of good bacteria in the gut may enhance your motivation to eat more intentionally and help you to apply changes that will be effective. When you are equipped with the truth, misleading advertisements and fad diets may be less able to convince you that dieting, restricting your food intake, avoiding certain foods, or purging has no impact on your health. Knowledge can empower you to turn what you learn into practice.

9. Stay hopeful.

By making your eating more intentional, you can impact your gut biome. And, with bidirectional influences, you can improve your gut with emotional well-being and improve how you feel by increasing the richness of your gut microbiota. To make a concerted effort in improving your gut health and mood, reach out to professionals—dietitians, [therapists](#), meditation instructors, and medical doctors—who are familiar with the gut–brain research.

The significant connection between feeling good and the well-being of your gut microbiota offers new paths for health, healthy eating, and eating disorder recovery. Being intentional about what you take into your body and your mind can have powerful whole-body effects, so nourish both with care.

References

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