

# RESILIENCY

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# NUTRITION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE GUT

It is well known that nutrition influences physical health, but did you know that food choices can also play an integral role in mental health and overall wellbeing? The brain and nervous system depend on nutrition to function, requiring complex carbohydrates, lean protein, and healthy fats. The relationship between the foods we eat and our mental status is mutually beneficial-- incorporating a variety of nutritious foods can enhance mood and wellbeing, and having a healthy mind can improve the food choices that we make.

There is also an important and direct relationship between our gut and brain, which can be affected by nutrition, stress, and bacteria that lives in the gastrointestinal tract. This connection plays a large role in mental health and wellbeing, which is greatly supported by nutrition and stress reduction strategies.

## **Gut-brain connection**

The phrase “having a gut-feeling” may mean more than you think. The gut-brain axis links the central and enteric nervous systems, creating communication between intestinal functions and the emotional and cognitive centers of the brain. This link is created by the vagus nerve and relays feelings such as hunger, satiety, and stress between the gut and brain.<sup>1</sup>

## **A healthy gut**

Over 100 trillion bacteria, known as the gut microbiota, live in the intestines. Their job is to prevent illness and strengthen immunity, synthesize essential vitamins, and harvest energy and nutrients from food.<sup>2</sup> The bacteria in the gut feeds on prebiotics like fiber, which is found in plant-based foods such as whole-grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes. Prebiotics play an integral role in supporting a healthy gut by feeding the “good” bacteria that’s already there. Probiotics, or live organisms, can be found in fermented foods such as Greek yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, and kombucha, and may further increase the quantity of healthy bacteria in the gut.

## **Stress and the gut microbiota**

Stress plays a large role in mental health management and may also have an effect on gut health, too. Stress reduction can lead to more healthful food choices, which in turn can increase the levels of healthy gut microbiota. Stress relief strategies can include practicing mindfulness or focusing on being fully aware of the present moment, as well as exercising, which has been shown to further reduce stress levels and risk of developing mental illness. Studies have also shown that, due to the gut-brain axis, reduced stress levels may directly lead to increased healthy gut flora.

It is always important to use a multi-step approach when taking care of your health. Practicing stress reduction as well as gut-health promotion through nutrition can be an effective strategy for improving and promoting mental health and overall wellbeing.

1. Appleton J. The Gut-Brain Axis: Influence of Microbiota on Mood and Mental Health. *Integr Med (Encinitas)*. 2018 Aug;17(4):28-32.
2. The Nutrition Source. The Microbiome. Harvard T. Chan School of Public Health. June 2022. Accessed August 29 2023. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/microbiome/#microbiota-benefit>