

FOOD INTOLERANCES & ALLERGIES

THE GUT-BRAIN CONNECTION

How digestive health may influence mental wellbeing

BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



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Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

My Thoughts

One of the questions I hear more often now than I did ten years ago is:

"Can my gut affect my mental health?"

It's a fascinating question, and one that science has been exploring with increasing interest over the last two decades.

As a psychotherapist, I've always been interested in the connection between mind and body. I don't believe we can fully understand one without considering the other.

Our thoughts affect our bodies.

Our bodies affect our thoughts.

Stress can change our digestion.

Poor sleep can influence our appetite.

Chronic pain can affect our mood.

Likewise, digestive symptoms can have a significant impact on confidence, relationships, work and quality of life.

As someone who has experienced ARFID, later discovered food intolerances and works with many neurodivergent individuals, I've become increasingly aware of how closely our physical and emotional wellbeing are linked.

That doesn't mean every mental health difficulty begins in the gut.

Nor does it mean improving your diet will cure anxiety or depression.

The reality is far more complex—and, in many ways, far more interesting.

What Is the Gut-Brain Connection?

The gut and the brain are constantly communicating with one another.

This communication happens through a network known as the gut-brain axis.

Rather than working independently, the digestive system and the brain send messages back and forth all day, every day.

This communication involves:

The nervous system

Hormones

The immune system

The trillions of microorganisms living in the digestive tract (the gut microbiome)

Together, these systems help regulate digestion, appetite, mood, stress responses and many other important functions.

Meet Your Gut Microbiome

Inside your digestive system lives an extraordinary community of bacteria, viruses, fungi and other microorganisms.

Collectively, they are known as the gut microbiome.

Although the word "bacteria" often sounds negative, many of these microorganisms play helpful roles.

They help digest certain foods.

They produce some vitamins.

They interact with the immune system.

They help maintain the lining of the gut.

Scientists estimate that trillions of microorganisms live within the human digestive tract, forming a remarkably complex ecosystem.

Every person's microbiome is unique, influenced by genetics, birth, diet, medication, environment and lifestyle.

The Vagus Nerve – A Two-Way Conversation

One of the most important communication pathways between the gut and the brain is the vagus nerve.

Think of it as a communication highway.

Messages travel from the brain to the digestive system and from the digestive system back to the brain.

This helps explain why emotional stress can sometimes lead to physical symptoms such as:

Butterflies in your stomach

Nausea

Stomach cramps

Changes in bowel habits

Loss of appetite

Likewise, ongoing digestive problems can influence how we feel emotionally.

The relationship works in both directions.

Stress and Digestion

This is something I see regularly in therapy.

When we experience stress, our nervous system prepares us to respond to challenge.

In the short term, this response can be helpful.

However, when stress becomes long-term, digestion may be affected.

Some people notice:

Reduced appetite

Increased appetite

Bloating

Constipation

Diarrhoea

Indigestion

Worsening symptoms of IBS

These responses don't mean the digestive system is "broken."

They're part of the body's natural response to prolonged stress.

Understanding this can often reduce the fear that something serious is happening.

Can Food Influence Mood?

This is one of the most common questions people ask.

Current research suggests that a balanced diet is associated with better overall physical health and may contribute to mental wellbeing.

Nutrients such as omega-3 fats, fibre, vitamins and minerals all play important roles in supporting normal brain function.

However, it's important to be cautious about claims that specific foods can cure depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions.

Mental health is influenced by many factors, including:

Genetics

Life experiences

Trauma

Relationships

Sleep

Physical health

Social circumstances

Neurodevelopmental differences

Environment

Nutrition is one piece of this much larger picture.

Neurodivergence and the Gut

Many autistic people and people with ADHD experience digestive difficulties more frequently than the general population.

Research has explored possible links between neurodivergence, the gut microbiome and gastrointestinal symptoms.

At present, this is an active area of research.

While some studies suggest associations, scientists are still working to understand exactly why these differences occur and what they might mean.

As someone who works extensively with autistic and ADHD clients, I believe it's important to approach this topic with curiosity rather than certainty.

Supporting digestive health may improve comfort and quality of life, but we should avoid making claims that dietary changes can alter someone's neurodivergence.

Neurodivergence is not something that needs curing.

Looking After Your Gut

You don't need expensive supplements or complicated diets to begin supporting your digestive health.

For many people, helpful habits include:

Eating a varied diet where possible.

Including fibre-rich foods if appropriate for your individual needs.

Drinking enough fluids.

Moving your body regularly.

Prioritising sleep.

Managing stress in ways that work for you.

Seeking medical advice if symptoms persist.

Small, sustainable changes are often far more effective than dramatic restrictions.

What Current Evidence Tells Us

Research into the gut-brain axis has grown rapidly over the last twenty years.

Current evidence supports the idea that the digestive system and the brain communicate continuously through multiple biological pathways.

Researchers continue to investigate how the gut microbiome may influence health, but many questions remain unanswered.

Most experts agree that while maintaining good nutrition supports overall health, claims that altering the microbiome can treat complex mental health conditions are currently not supported by sufficient high-quality evidence.

Science is moving quickly, and our understanding will almost certainly continue to evolve.

Key Takeaways

The gut and brain communicate constantly through the gut-brain axis.

Stress can affect digestion, and digestive symptoms can affect emotional wellbeing.

The gut microbiome plays an important role in human health.

Nutrition supports overall wellbeing but is only one factor influencing mental health.

Research into the gut-brain connection is promising, but many questions remain.

Curiosity and evidence should guide our understanding rather than exaggerated health claims.

Before You Go...

One of the things I love most about science is that it's always learning.

Years ago, we understood far less about the relationship between our digestive system and our brain than we do today.

Years from now, we'll almost certainly know much more.

For me, that's exciting.

Not because it promises quick fixes, but because it reminds us that health is incredibly interconnected.

Looking after your body isn't separate from looking after your mind.

They work together every single day.

Whether your goal is improving your digestion, supporting your mental wellbeing or simply understanding yourself a little better, remember that lasting health is rarely built on one dramatic change.

It's built through small, compassionate choices made consistently over time.

And I think that's something worth holding onto.

Maggie Learoyd

Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Founder of Space to Breathe Therapy

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YorkTest offers a wider range of home-to-laboratory options, including: Premium Food Intolerance Test; Food Allergy Test; Food Intolerance & Allergy Bundle; Junior Food Intolerance Test; Gut Microbiome Test; Annual Health Test; Essential Health Check; Stress (Cortisol) Test; Female Hormones Test; Female Fertility Test; Menopause Test; Male Hormones Test; Thyroid Test; Liver Function Test; Cholesterol Test; Inflammation (CRP) Test; Vitamin D Test; Metabolic Health Test; and couples, parent-and-child, family and complete health-and-nutrition bundles.

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Testing should be considered alongside symptoms, clinical history and appropriate professional advice. A food allergy can be serious: suspected immediate allergy symptoms require medical assessment. IgG food-reactivity testing is different from diagnostic IgE allergy testing and remains debated, so results should not be used alone to diagnose illness or begin a highly restrictive diet.