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Gut health impacts mental wellness

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THE link between gut health and overall wellbeing has been well established. But do you know that gut health impacts mental health too? The trillions of bacteria residing in our gut play a pivotal role in influencing mood. In fact, gut microbiota is responsible for 90 per cent of serotonin, one of the hormones that make us happy. This means that when your gut is happy with all the right nutrients, your mind follows suit.

Gut health and mental health are connected through what is known as the gut-brain axis, a communication pathway between the gastrointestinal tract and the brain, explains LAC Malaysia nutritionist Cynthia Jetan.

Often referred to as the “second brain”, the gut harbours a complex network of microbes that play a fundamental role.

“The gut uses the same biochemicals and nerve network as the brain to help us digest and alert the brain when something is wrong,” says Cynthia.

This intricate network with the brain enables constant communication through various channels, including the nervous, immune and endocrine systems. It is this last system that is important for mental health, whereby the gut microbiota helps with the production of crucial neurotransmitters.

For one, it helps produce the happy neurotransmitter serotonin, which regulates your mood, appetite and sleep, says Cynthia.

Similarly, gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), an inhibitory neurotransmitter also produced in the gut, calms the nervous system and reduces anxiety.

Then there is dopamine, a neurotransmitter commonly associated with pleasure — about 50 per cent of it is produced in the gut.

KEEP IT BALANCED

Imbalances in gut bacteria composition can disrupt the production of these important neurotransmitters, potentially contributing to mood disorders like anxiety and depression. Have you ever experienced butterflies in your stomach when feeling nervous? That’s your gut signalling your brain, highlighting the profound connection between gut health and mental wellbeing.

When we neglect gut health, it causes an imbalance, resulting in the gut failing to produce these important neurotransmitters.

“It results in lower serotonin and dopamine levels in your system. More bad than good bacteria in the gut can also lead to inflammation, disrupting communication between your gut and brain,” says Cynthia.

Inflammation releases biochemicals that influence brain function, including mood regulation. The gut-brain axis works both ways. When we are stressed and anxious, the brain sends signals to the gut. We experience digestive stress such as stomach upsets, nausea and constipation.

When we experience digestive distress, our gut sends signals to the brain. This will affect our mood and we will feel anxious and depressed.