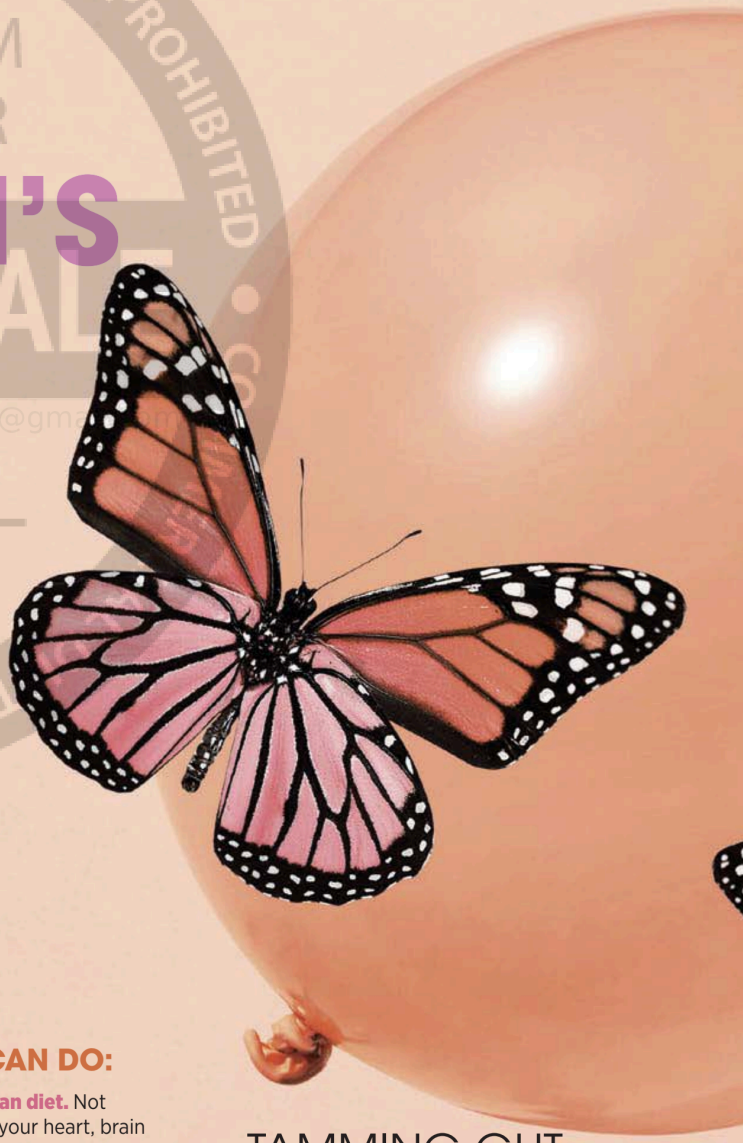
- Digestion

YOUR STOMACH'S *Secret life*

BY MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU

You know how when you're nervous, you get butterflies in your stomach, or you can feel tired and sluggish all day when you're constipated? This shows that the gut and the rest of the body have a big influence on each other.

In recent years, research has made that connection even clearer. Heart disease, type 2 diabetes and autoimmune conditions have all been linked to various factors associated with a troubled gut. But by taking care of your 8-10 metre-long GI tract, you can boost your wellbeing. Here's why your gut health matters.



THE RIGHT MICROBES MEAN FEWER ILLNESSES

The trillions of bacteria, fungi and even parasites and viruses that live inside the gut, collectively known as the gut microbiome, play a huge role in our overall health as well as the health of our digestive systems. The microbiome is so intricate that distinct colonies reside in different parts of the GI tract.

Scientists don't yet know the ideal mix of organisms, but having an imbalanced microbiome has been linked to numerous illnesses including diabetes and childhood asthma. The food we eat, which becomes the food the critters in our guts feast on, is a crucial component in fostering a diverse microbiome. But other things contribute too: for example, changing sleep schedules may alter the composition of the microbiome.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Eat a Mediterranean diet.** Not only is this good for your heart, brain and general health but studies also show that this diet – which is rich in vegetables, fruits and healthy fats – increases microbiome diversity.
- **Move your muscles.** Exercise enhances the number and variety of beneficial microbial species.
- **Don't rely on supplements.** Getting probiotics from food is always best. And for people with certain gut illnesses who have too many of the wrong organisms, taking probiotic supplements may actually worsen the imbalance, delaying recovery of the natural diversity of organisms.

TAMMING GUT INFLAMATION CAN HELP YOUR WHOLE BODY

Certain bowel diseases, such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, are defined by inflammation. But not all the inflammatory cells stay inside the gut. They also produce inflammatory mediators that can impact the entire body, which is why these conditions lead to a higher risk of inflammatory diseases elsewhere, including in the skin, the joints and the cardiovascular system.

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Researchers have found that younger people with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) are more likely than their peers to have heart attacks. Treating gut inflammation with prescription meds often helps other symptoms of inflammation such as joint pain and arthritis. (NSAIDs such as ibuprofen should be avoided if you have IBD, as they could make it worse.)

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

▶**Get seven to eight hours of sleep each night.** Sleep plays a significant part in immune function, weight, and overall health, explains gastroenterologist Dr Avlin Imaeda.

▶**Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables,** which are naturally high in the antioxidants that can assist in tamping down gut inflammation.

▶**Stop smoking:** It contributes to inflammation in the bowels and can worsen inflammatory bowel disease.

YOU HAVE ANOTHER "BRAIN" IN YOUR GUT

The brain in your head sends signals to your body about almost everything you feel, including emotions and pain, and many of those signals travel to your digestive tract. In fact, your gut and your brain are more intimately connected than any other body systems, thanks to the large number of nerve cells in the intestines.

The vagus nerve, which goes from the brain down to the gut and beyond, is the main superhighway for this information exchange. Chatter along the gut-brain axis not only influences digestion but can also affect pain sensitivity, cognitive function and the immune system.

Dr Simone Peters, an Australian psychophysiologist and co-founder of IBS healthcare company TUMME, says the line of communication between the brain and gut can be altered in some people, "and what that really means is that things that are going on at either end can contribute to their symptoms," she says.

In fact, a large study found that people with severe irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) had twice the rates of depression and anxiety of people without IBS.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

▶**Snack on fermented foods such as kefir and yoghurt.** They benefit the gut-brain axis, scientists have found.

▶**Consider mind-body therapies such as gut hypnotherapy,** cognitive behavioural therapy or progressive muscle relaxation to gain better control over your gut health.

▶**Stimulate your vagus nerve with activities such as yoga,** meditation, or slow and controlled breathing.

THE GUT IS A HORMONE HUB

Nerves aren't the only way the belly talks to the rest of the body. Many hormones (including insulin, which helps control blood sugar, and GLP-1, the hormone mimicked by popular diabetes and weight-loss medications) are produced in the stomach or intestines or connect with receptors there that let them go to work.

These hormones influence nearly all aspects of physical and mental health, contributing to conditions including diabetes, obesity, cancers and other tumours, and anxiety. The gut also provides approximately 95 per cent of the mood-regulating hormone serotonin, which may be why eating a healthy diet can have such a positive impact on mood.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

▶**Choose whole foods whenever possible** to keep your digestive hormones steady.

▶**Take relaxing walks in nature.** Stress reduction is especially crucial for gut health because when the body's fight-or-flight hormone response is activated, digestion slows to a crawl, which can lead to irritation.