

# The Gut & Mental Health: Fact Sheet

## Discovery of the Gut-Brain Connection

Research done by John Hopkins Medical Center discovered a direct connection between the gut and the brain (n.d.). The director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Neurogastroenterology, Jay Pasricha, M.D., conducted research that showed this connection (Ome, 2018).

Researchers are calling the gut the “Second Brain.” Located along the entire digestive tract, the enteric nervous system (ENS) is composed of the same neurons and neurotransmitters as the central nervous system (Cleveland Clinic, 2016). The ENS is mainly responsible for directing the digestion process (Ome, 2018).

According to Harvard Health, the brain sends as well as receives messages from the gut. Not only does this confirm that emotional health can impact the gut, but issues of the stomach or intestine can also be the cause of stress, anxiety, and depression (Komaroff, n.d.).

The ENS can cause significant changes in emotions for those with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Doctors have described certain antidepressants to treat IBS. Furthermore, Dr. Pasricha stated that interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can improve the relationship between the gut and the brain (Ome, 2018).

## Improving Gut Health

A plant-based diet enhances gut health (Physicians Committee, n.d.).

Gerard Mullin, a gastroenterologist, explained that Americans need to eat 40 to 50 percent more fiber than they do. He presented the solution to this would be increasing the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables into their diet in order to increase bacteria and improve gut health (John Hopkins Medicine, n.d.).

Prebiotics, found in foods such as garlic, asparagus, beans, bananas, whole wheat, spinach, and oats, feed healthy bacteria. Conversely, red meats, dairy, and fried foods feed unhealthy bacteria, leading to disease. Probiotics are also key in improving gut health (Physicians Committee, n.d.)

Youth in behavioral health facilities need to have access to nutritious food in order to progress optimally. A diet rich in fiber, prebiotics, and probiotics will improve their physical and mental health.

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