Healthy eating advice: Trust your gut

K-State nutrition specialist says gut acts as ‘second brain’ for healthy bodies

MANHATTAN, Kan. – As it turns out, trusting your gut when making decisions about healthy eating could be a very good thing.

Kansas State University nutrition specialist Sandy Procter said there is a growing body of research that indicates the human gut serves as a type of “second brain” that affects not only digestion, but also a person’s mood, health and even the way we think.

According to an article from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, the brain in the human gut is called the enteric nervous system, or ENS. It consists of two thin layers of more than 100 million nerve cells lining the gastrointestinal tract from the esophagus to the rectum.

Procter notes that many scientists and doctors are discovering a link between the ENS and the human brain in which the two routinely communicate about changes in the body. The link may trigger big emotional shifts experienced by people coping with such bowel problems as constipation, diarrhea, bloating, pain and stomach upset – conditions that affect up to 40 percent of the population.

“The overlap and the synergy between the systems in our bodies may help explain some of the mental-physical – or mind versus gut – relationships that we’ve long been aware of in human health,” Procter said.

Put more simply, foods that promote gut health not only may be good for you physically; they also may help your mental state of mind, easing such conditions as depression and anxiety.

Fortunately, Procter notes there is sound, science-based evidence of foods that support digestive health.

“One example is whole grains,” she said. “Whole grains provide fiber, which is important to gut health. When gut bacteria ferment fiber, they produce short chain fatty acids, which in turn promote proper function in the cells lining the colon. The colon is where most of our immune cells are found.
“So the short answer becomes: Eat whole grain foods for good health.”

Procter shared nine research-based ways to improve gut bacteria:

**Eat a diverse range of foods**

“Dietary diversity is considered very important to human health, beginning with babies’ first feedings,” Procter said. “It is believed that the more species of bacteria we have in our gut, the greater number of health benefits we may derive.”

She notes that the typical American diet is not very diverse and is high in fat and sugar, which may work against healthy bacteria in the gut.

**Eat a lot of vegetables, fruit, beans and legumes**

Procter calls these foods “nutrition stars.” In addition to providing many nutrients that support a healthy gut, they are high in fiber, which supports the growth of healthy bacteria.

**Eat fermented foods**

Some examples include yogurt (especially plain, natural or unsweetened types), kimchi, kefir, sauerkraut, tempeh and kombucha. “These are foods that are produced by bacteria or yeasts that convert sugars to organic acids or alcohol,” Procter said. “They are high in lactobacilli, a beneficial bacteria.”

Many fermented foods are relatively new to U.S. stores and diets, but have been enjoyed globally for thousands of years.

**Avoid artificial sweeteners**

Studies have shown that artificial sweeteners negatively affect the microbiota and, in turn, work against healthy blood sugar levels.

**Eat prebiotic foods**

Some examples include onions, leeks, asparagus, bananas, oats, barley and flax seed. Prebiotic foods promote the growth of beneficial bacteria in the gut.

**Breastfeed at least six months**

“Breastfeeding helps an infant develop a healthy microbiota, which may protect against some diseases later on,” Procter said.

Studies show that infants who are formula-fed have an altered microbiota, with fewer healthy bacteria, compared to those who have been breastfed.

**Eat whole grains**
Whole grains contain fiber and non-digestible carbohydrate substances. Since they are not digested, those substances move into the large intestine and are broken down to promote the growth of beneficial bacteria.

**Consider more plant-based foods on your plate**

Procter said it may be the high fiber content of plant-based foods that benefits the gut microbiota, “but research tells us it may also be something else, such as the healthier lifestyle vegetarians tend to lead over omnivores.”

**Eat foods rich in polyphenols**

Polyphenols are naturally-occurring plant compounds that often have antioxidant properties, and are broken down and digested by the gut microbiota.

Good sources of polyphenols include apples, red wine, grape juice, dark chocolate, cocoa, olive oil, green tea, almonds, blueberries and broccoli.

Those with physical issues or questions related to their diet or digestion should consult with a medical professional before making changes to their diet. Procter said healthy people interested in increasing the benefits of eating a varied, healthful diet can receive guidance from the USDA’s MyPlate, or learn more about the Mediterranean Eating Plan from North Carolina State extension.

“So much is being learned and understood about the human microbiota, gut health and how our food choices and diet diversity can affect our total health – our immune system, in particular,” Procter said. “Ideally, it makes sense to consider healthy eating and an active lifestyle along the entire lifespan.”

-FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story  
The Brain-Gut Connection (Johns Hopkins School of Medicine),  

MyPlate (USDA), [www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/what-is-myplate](http://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/what-is-myplate)

Foods for gut health (North Carolina State extension), [https://medinsteadofmeds.com/](https://medinsteadofmeds.com/)

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