



Wellbeing Insights



The Gut-Brain Connection: Unlocking the Path to Better Health

Have you ever had a "gut feeling"? It turns out this isn't just a figure of speech. Science is uncovering a fascinating link between our gut and brain, known as the gut-brain connection. This relationship strongly impacts our physical health, emotional wellbeing and even cognitive function like memory and decision-making. With understanding of how the gut and brain communicate, we can take practical steps to improve our wellbeing.

The gut and brain are in constant communication through a network called the gut-brain axis. This connection involves physical links, such as the vagus nerve, and chemical messengers, such as hormones and neurotransmitters. The gut microbiome, consisting of trillions of bacteria, fungi and other microbes in the digestive system, plays a key role in this communication. These microbes help

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The Gut-Brain Connection: Unlocking the Path to Better Health

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digest food, produce essential vitamins and regulate the immune system.

What makes the gut-brain connection especially interesting is its influence on mood and behavior. The gut produces about 90% of the body's serotonin, often called the "feel-good" neurotransmitter, which impacts happiness, anxiety and emotional stability. The gut microbiome also affects dopamine, another key chemical tied to motivation and reward.

When the gut microbiome is healthy and balanced, the communication between the gut and brain supports overall health. When this is not the case, it can lead to issues involving:

- **Mood Regulation:** An imbalance in gut bacteria, known as dysbiosis, has been linked to anxiety, depression and other mood disorders.
- **Cognitive Function:** Emerging research suggests a healthy gut contributes to sharper memory and better focus. Pro-inflammatory substances released during gut imbalances may interfere with brain function, leading to "brain fog."
- **Stress Response:** Stress can disrupt the gut's balance, reducing the diversity of microbes and affecting digestion. Conversely, gut imbalances can heighten the brain's stress response, creating a cycle that exacerbates both physical and emotional strain.
- **Immune System Health:** The gut houses about 70% of the body's immune system. When the microbiome is well-balanced, it helps regulate inflammation, which is increasingly linked to neurological conditions like Alzheimer's disease.

The brain, in turn, influences gut health. Stress and anxiety can alter gut motility (how food moves through the digestive system) and permeability (the strength of the gut lining), leading to issues like bloating or discomfort. Chronic stress may also suppress the immune system, making the gut more vulnerable to infections.

Enhancing Gut-Brain Health

The good news is that nurturing this vital connection can be straightforward. Small, consistent changes make a significant difference.

1. **Eat for gut health.** A diet rich in whole, nutrient-dense foods is key to supporting your gut. Fiber is especially important, as it feeds the beneficial bacteria in your microbiome. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds are great options. Including fermented foods, such as yogurt, kefir, kimchi, miso and sauerkraut, can add probiotics: live bacteria that boost gut health. Prebiotics,



which are fibers that feed good bacteria, can be found in foods like bananas, garlic, onions and asparagus. Limiting processed foods, artificial sweeteners and excessive sugar is equally important as they can harm the gut microbiome and increase inflammation.

2. **Manage stress.** Stress management is crucial for a healthy gut-brain connection. Practices like mindfulness, meditation, yoga and deep breathing exercises can help calm your mind and reduce the impact of stress on your gut.
3. **Stay active.** Regular physical activity promotes a diverse and healthy gut microbiome. Exercise also supports good digestion, reduces stress and improves mood, creating a positive feedback loop between the gut and brain.
4. **Get quality sleep.** Sleep is when your body repairs itself, and this includes your gut. Poor sleep can disrupt the microbiome while consistent, restful sleep supports its balance. Aim for seven to nine hours of quality sleep each night.
5. **Stay hydrated.** Drinking plenty of water helps your digestive system function properly, ensuring waste is eliminated efficiently and your gut environment remains balanced.
6. **Consider probiotics and supplements.** If your diet doesn't provide enough probiotics or prebiotics, supplements may be a good option. Probiotic supplements can replenish beneficial bacteria, and prebiotic supplements provide the fuel they need. Be sure to consult a health care provider before starting any new supplements.

If you experience symptoms like frequent digestive upset, mood swings, chronic stress and fatigue, it could be a sign of gut-brain imbalance. Consider consulting a health care professional for personalized guidance if symptoms persist.

By supporting the balance of our gut microbiome, we not only improve digestion but also strengthen our mental health and resilience against stress. So, the next time you think about your health, don't forget to pay attention to your gut — it's smarter than you might think!



ON THE MENU

Beets

Beets are more than just a colorful addition to your plate — they're a nutritional powerhouse packed with health benefits. Known for their deep red-purple color and versatility in the kitchen, beets are a root vegetable worth exploring. Whether you're looking to boost your diet, improve your health or simply try something new, beets have a lot to offer.

These nutrient-rich vegetables are low in calories but high in essential vitamins and minerals. A single cup of cooked beets provides 3.8 grams of fiber to aid digestion and 37% of your daily need for folate (vitamin B9), which is essential for cell function and growth. The same serving offers 22% of your daily manganese requirement, which is important for bone health and metabolism. Beets are also a good source of potassium, which supports heart and muscle health, and contain vitamin C to help your immune system. Additionally, beets are rich in antioxidants and nitrates — natural compounds that can lower blood pressure, improve circulation and enhance exercise performance.

Beets have a naturally sweet, earthy flavor that varies depending on how they're prepared. Roasting brings out their caramel-like sweetness while steaming or boiling maintains a milder taste. Some varieties, such as golden beets, are less earthy and slightly sweeter than the classic red beet.

Selecting fresh beets is key to their flavor and texture. Look for firm, smooth beets with a vibrant color. Smaller beets are typically more tender. To store, remove the greens and keep them in the fridge for up to a few days. Place unwashed beets in a breathable bag and store them in the refrigerator's crisper drawer where they can last up to two weeks.

There are many ways to easily incorporate beets into your diet including:

- **Raw:** Grate raw beets into salads for a crunchy, sweet boost.
- **Roasted:** Cut beets into chunks, toss with olive oil, salt and pepper, and roast at 400°F for about 30 minutes.
- **Smoothies:** Add cooked or raw beets to your smoothie for a vibrant color and extra nutrients.

Beet Salad With Feta

Ingredients:

- 3 roasted beets
- 2 oz. feta cheese
- ¼ cup fresh basil leaves, sliced
- 1 tsp. balsamic vinegar
- 1 tsp. oil (olive or avocado)
- Salt & pepper to taste

Nutrition Info

Yields 4

Calories	124
Total Fat	4g
Carbohydrates	17g
Sugar	12g
Fiber	4g
Protein	4g

Directions:

Toss all ingredients together and serve.

Mix it up:

- Experiment with other herbs like mint.
- Swap out feta for another variety like goat cheese.
- Add a crunch with chopped pistachios or walnuts.



- **Soups:** Use beets in hearty dishes like borscht for their rich flavor and color.
- **Pickled:** Enjoy tangy pickled beets as a snack or salad topping.
- **Chips:** Slice thinly, season and bake for a healthy, crispy snack.

No matter how you choose to prepare them, the versatile beet is sure to bring flavor, nutrition and color to your meals.

Understanding Procrastination & How to Overcome It

Procrastination is a challenge that nearly everyone faces at some point. Whether it's delaying a work project, putting off exercise or avoiding household chores, procrastination disrupts productivity, increases stress and can lead to a frustrating cycle of avoidance. But why do we procrastinate, and how can we effectively address this habit? Understanding its root causes and employing practical strategies can empower you to overcome procrastination and achieve your goals more efficiently.

What is Procrastination?

Procrastination is the act of delaying or postponing tasks, often unnecessarily. It's not about laziness; rather, it stems from a complex interplay of emotions, thought patterns and situational factors. At its core, procrastination is a way of coping with stress, fear or uncertainty. However, while it might provide temporary relief, it often leads to greater challenges in the long run.

Common Causes of Procrastination

Fear & Anxiety

Fear is one of the primary drivers of procrastination. For instance, someone might avoid scheduling a medical appointment because they're afraid of a potential diagnosis. Similarly, fear of judgment or criticism can lead people to delay submitting work, having difficult conversations or stepping into social situations.

Perfectionism

While striving for excellence can be motivating, perfectionism can have the opposite effect. The fear of not meeting impossibly high standards can lead to paralysis, causing individuals to delay starting or completing tasks.

Task Perception

Tasks that feel dull, irrelevant or overly complex are often pushed aside in favor of more appealing activities. When a task lacks personal meaning, it's harder to muster the motivation to start or finish it.

Doubts About Your Abilities

A lack of confidence can also contribute to procrastination. Doubts about your skills or the fear of failure can make tasks seem insurmountable. For large or complicated tasks, the uncertainty about where to begin can lead to avoidance.

Lack of Clear Goals

Unclear or poorly defined goals can make it difficult to know what steps to take. Without a clear endpoint, it's easy to drift into inaction.

Identifying why you procrastinate is the first step toward change. For deeper insights into the "why" behind



procrastination, Linda Sapadin and Jack Maguire's book, *It's About Time!: The Six Styles of Procrastination and How to Overcome Them*, offers a detailed breakdown of procrastination types.

Strategies to Overcome Procrastination

The good news is that procrastination isn't a fixed trait; it's a habit that can be changed. The following strategies can help you address procrastination head-on:

Break tasks into smaller steps. Large tasks can feel overwhelming, so divide them into smaller, manageable parts. Completing even one small step can create a sense of accomplishment and build momentum.

Set clear goals and deadlines. Define your objectives and establish deadlines for completing them. Specific goals help you stay focused and accountable.

Use the "two-minute rule." If a task takes less than two minutes, do it immediately. This simple rule prevents small tasks from piling up and becoming daunting.

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Understanding Procrastination & How to Overcome It

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Eliminate distractions. Create an environment that supports focus. Turn off notifications, set boundaries with others and ensure your workspace is organized and conducive to productivity.

Practice time blocking. Dedicate specific blocks of time to particular tasks. This approach reduces decision fatigue and helps you maintain focus throughout the day.

Reward yourself. Incorporate a reward system to stay motivated. For example, treat yourself to a favorite snack, a short walk or a relaxing activity after completing a challenging task.

Address negative self-talk. Replace unhelpful thoughts like “I’ll never finish this” with positive affirmations like “I’m capable of making progress.” A shift in mindset can make a significant difference in your productivity.

Set realistic expectations. If perfectionism is holding you back, remind yourself that progress is more important than perfection. Strive for consistent effort rather than flawless results.

Seek support. Share your goals with a trusted friend, colleague or mentor. Accountability partners can encourage you to stay on track and celebrate your achievements with you.

Leverage productivity tools. Apps, timers and planners can help you stay organized and focused. Experiment with tools or digital task managers to find what works best for you.

Building Long-term Habits to Combat Procrastination

Addressing procrastination isn’t just about short-term fixes; it requires cultivating habits that prevent it from resurfacing

1. **Develop a consistent routine.** Routines reduce decision fatigue and create a predictable structure for your day. For instance, set aside the same time daily for your most important tasks.
2. **Reflect and adjust.** Regularly evaluate your productivity strategies. At the end of each day or week, ask yourself what worked well and where improvements are needed. Use this feedback to refine your approach.
3. **Focus on progress, not perfection.** Acknowledge that completing something imperfectly is often better than not completing it at all. Celebrate incremental progress as a victory.
4. **Build resilience.** Don’t let occasional setbacks derail your efforts. Treat mistakes as learning opportunities and recommit to your goals.
5. **Celebrate your wins.** Recognize and reward your achievements, no matter how small.

The Role of Mindset in Overcoming Procrastination

Your mindset plays a crucial role in combating procrastination. Viewing challenges as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles can shift your perspective and boost your motivation. Adopt a growth-oriented mindset by embracing mistakes as part of the learning process and focusing on the benefits of completing your tasks.

Remember, the journey to overcoming procrastination starts with small, intentional steps. The next time you feel the urge to delay a task, pause and reflect on the strategies discussed here. With consistent effort and a willingness to adapt, you can transform procrastination from a stumbling block into a steppingstone for success. Let today be the day you take the first step toward reclaiming your time and focus.

From Ada Twist to Real Life Role Models: How to Keep Girls Engaged in Science for a Lifetime

Before Netflix's "Ada Twist, Scientist" there was Valerie Frizzle whose adventures on "The Magic School Bus" made science fun and exciting. While some might dismiss children's shows as cartoons, their impact is significant. Studies show that modeling science learning beyond the classroom is crucial for sparking interest in science careers. Female lead characters like Ms. Frizzle have inspired many Millennial women in science, with "The Magic School Bus" often cited as a source of inspiration.

February 11th is International Day of Women and Girls in Science: a day to reflect on the progress women have made and the challenges they face in STEM fields. In 2018, women represented one in three researchers, with the highest participation in life sciences. However, women remain underrepresented in digital information technology, computing, physics, mathematics and engineering — fields shaping the future of the digital revolution.

To support girls' interest in science, it's crucial to promote female role models at every stage of development. In younger years, when science still feels magical, encouraging curiosity is key. Questions like "How does that work?" or "How would you solve this problem?" can ignite a child's imagination. Fostering creativity and welcoming all ideas, no matter how outlandish, can fuel exploration and interest.

However, studies show that while girls begin to show interest in science around age 11, this often declines by age 15. As they outgrow cartoons, it's vital to highlight real-life women in science. Sharing stories about historical figures like "The Calutron Girls" or "The Harvard Computers" and contemporary scientists like Emily Calendrelli (of "Emily's Lab" and "Blue Origin") and Mayim Bialik (of "The Big Bang Theory" and "Blossom") can help girls see science as an accessible career path.



Connecting science to other interests can also help maintain engagement. For example, a girl passionate about sports could explore human physiology and biomechanics, leading to a career in sports science. A love for fashion and cosmetics could spark an interest in chemistry, leading to work in textile production or cosmetic R&D. A passion for music could inspire a career as a sound engineer where knowledge of physics is essential.

Most importantly, girls need to believe that careers in science are both achievable and sustainable. Research from Microsoft shows that girls are more likely to pursue science careers if they believe they'll be treated fairly in the workplace. If your daughter expresses an interest in science, helping her identify prominent women in the field can show her success is possible. Local mentors can also provide guidance and support.

By showing your commitment to her success, you empower your daughter to pursue her passion for science. And with the right encouragement and role models, she can feel confident in her ability to make a meaningful impact in the science world.

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