

# Gut Feelings

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26TH, 2017

~ *By Kirsten Antony R.N.* ~

As plentiful as butterflies in the stomach, metonyms abound when describing how nerves can affect our “gut feelings”. Whether it be a “knot in the stomach” while awaiting news from a doctor, or a “punch in the gut” from receiving traumatic news, these emotional triggers are known as the brain-gut connection. Our “gut instincts” are a complex system of neurons that reside in our Gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

Researchers have found that the GI tract has much more of a detailed job than just digesting and processing food. The field of Neurogastroenterology studies the connection between the brain and the GI tract. The enteric nervous system (the GI tract and its 200 million neurons) is now known as the second brain. These neurons can convey feelings of anxiety, excitement, stress and depression to the rest of our body just as the neurons in our brains do. Hence, emotional upset can cause chronic GI disturbances and chronic GI issues can lead to depression or anxiety. As with many disorders, the body operates as a whole and one issue can lead to another. This is particularly true with the brain and GI as they communicate via the vagus nerve.

GI health is also linked directly to the immune system. A healthy gut can help regulate a healthy immune response. It is the microbiota, (the trillions of bacteria that reside in the GI tract), that influence the health of the immune system. This is important, as an imbalance in the microbiota leading to a depressed immune system has been linked to many diseases and illnesses from depression, to Parkinson’s disease to dementia.

There are things we can do for our health to improve the functioning of our GI tract and the microbiota. The microbiota is a mix of good and bad bacteria that work in harmony to keep us in good health. Probiotics are the “good” bacteria in our GI tract and we can ingest these microorganisms via foods and/or live cultures in supplements. Some foods that contain probiotics are fermented foods such as yogurt, kefir, miso, and sauerkraut. Other foods are known as prebiotics such as bananas, honey, onions, garlic

and whole grains. Prebiotics are good to eat because they feed the good bacteria.

If you feel as if you have an imbalance in your intestinal flora, please consult your doctor if you are thinking about taking any probiotics.

The GI region is also known as the solar plexus in energy medicine. Having a balanced solar plexus can help overcome emotional and digestive upsets as well. Spices such as chamomile, ginger, cumin and mint will help to balance the GI as well as aromatherapy oils such as ginger, orange and grapefruit. This is the center of willpower. An imbalance in the solar plexus can lead to disorders such as constipation, depression, eating disorders and issues with self-esteem.

Scientists are still discovering much about the brain-gut connection. But even without all the technological advances we have had, it was Hippocrates who is noted of saying over 2,000 years ago that all disease begins in the gut. I'm going to go with my gut and agree.

