

## Why gut health matters

To work at our best, we need to be in a good mental state. That depends on many factors, but an essential one is diet and gut health.

The way we eat affects the way we think. If we have a healthy gut, we're more likely to have a healthy mind. Our gut is actually lined with receptors that connect with our brain via the vagus nerve, sending signals that affect our mental health. Our 'gut feelings' are ones we need to respect.

Our bodies are an ecosystem. We have a symbiotic relationship to a host of bugs. There are more cells of microbes in our body than human cells (I've seen different ratios published, from 50% to 90% non-human). Approximately 500 different species of bacteria live inside us. These communities have a direct impact on our health and behaviour in general, not just with regard to food cravings.

Achieving a healthy diversity of gut microbes is essential to health. When the gut biome is unbalanced, medical problems may be encountered including depression, inflammatory bowel disease, obesity, allergies, cancer, and other conditions. At least 70% of our immune system is located in our digestive system, making it critical to maintain optimal health. 90% of disease is related to gut biome problems.

Happily, this knowledge is now getting into the mainstream medical world. Dr Michael Moseley, who makes TV programmes, has recently brought out 'The Clever Guts Diet', which I heartily recommend. Here are a couple of quotes from his book:

*'...buried in our intestines, deep inside its tissue, is a very thin layer of brain. It's called the enteric system....When we talk about having 'gut feelings' or 'gut instincts', we are reflecting the reality of how closely our guts and brains are entwined.'*

*'Changing your biome may reduce anxiety and lessen depression.'*

I'm quite sure that the positive effects of mindfulness come more easily, if we're eating and drinking well; in fact I believe that a healthy gut is an essential component for progressing well in this practice. Read about it for yourself (another good read is 'Brain Maker', by David Perlmutter), but here are three simple changes you could start to make in relation to eating and drinking at work:

- 1) **Reduce sugar intake.** Sugar causes energy spikes and lows. If we feed the bacteria that like sugar, they get dominant, sending signals to the brain to eat more...sugar! So break the cycle. **Try nuts when you need a snack.**
- 2) **Don't drink too much coffee.** We vary in our tolerance so figure it out for yourself, but be aware that the caffeine buzz mimics a sugar high and

supercharges the nervous system, sending us into an imbalance that will at some point backfire. **Drink more water to replace caffeinated drinks.**

- 3) Increase the diversity and amount of fresh fruit and veg.** As well as potentially replacing processed foods and carbohydrates such as biscuits, and working more effectively than any multivitamin pill, they will help create gut biome diversity. For example, **take a little stack of carrot, cucumber, pepper and celery sticks to work. Eat a bit more fruit and a few less buns.**

The good news is that changes can be seen in the microbiome within a week of making changes to your diet. If you're really going for this, fermented foods like sauerkraut, kimchi, yoghurt and kefir will feed your gut bacteria and make the good ones want to stick around. A good way to increase fruit and veg is to try eat something from each colour plant food each day (purple-red-orange-yellow-white-green). Note also that stress, antibiotics, too much alcohol, and NSAIDs like aspirin and ibuprofen can have a negative impact on gut bacteria.