CULINARY SERVICES GROUP

The Brain–Gut Connection

The Science Behind Nutrition & Mental Health





Mental Health Awareness

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. If you or a family member are one of the millions of Americans that live with mental illness, you know the value of finding quality care and support.

As a food service provider dedicated to serving healthcare communities, Culinary Services Group recognizes that behavioral health clients have unique dining service needs. We've partnered with many behavioral health clients to create custom menus that support wellness & recovery. We can support clients as they transition back into the community by providing nutritional education and in some cases even vocational training.

We're fascinated by the connection between the gut and the brain. As nutritional experts and culinarians, its our goal to make people feel better through food! In support of Mental Health Awareness Month, we're exploring the science behind nutrition and mental health.

Gut Feelings

While many factors can influence a person's mental health, new research shows your gut can also influence your brain. Every human being has a unique microbiome in their gastrointestinal tract, and the disruption of microbes in our gut has recently been linked to mental health. Did you know, more than half of all patients with irritable bowel syndrome also have a diagnosed mood disorder? Studies have linked many other brain disorders like depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia to the stability of gut microbiota.

So, are bacteria in the gut the key to regulating neurological function? Well, its known that the gut and brain are in constant communication through the brain-gut axis. The brain-gut axis is a bidirectional communication network that monitors and links gut functions to the cognitive and emotional centers of the brain through the central nervous system. Current research is helping us to understand how commonly used drugs affect both the brain and our guts. Studies have shown that antibiotics can have significant psychiatric side effects, including anxiety, major depression, and psychosis, which may be linked to their antimicrobial effect in the gut. A recent study of several classes of antidepressants found that these drugs also have a strong antimicrobial effect on bacteria found in the human gut.

When the gut microbiome is altered through diet, or medication it can profoundly affect the brain. Nutrition and maintaining a healthy gut may play a more critical to mental health than previously considered.



Feed Your Brain

Diet can play an important role in shaping the microbiome found in our guts. High-fat diets not only put us at greater risk for obesity, heart disease, and diabetes, they can harm our brain health too. High-fat diets can change the types of microbes found in the gut. Obesity, insulin resistance, and low metabolism have all been linked to a less diverse gut microbiome.

Interestingly, research has also linked high-fat diets to increased depression and anxiety. Does obesity cause depression or does depression cause obesity? Researchers have made both arguments, however, a high-fat diet can also cause inflammation and elevated cortisol levels, which may cause depression and anxiety.

Research supports limiting the consumption of sweets and sugary beverages to support brain health too. Higher sugar consumption is also connected to depression and common mood disorders, especially in men. Like high-fat diets, sugar consumption is often associated with obesity, inflammation, and diabetes. High sugar intake is not only associated with an increased risk of depression, but there is also evidence that sugar affects the body's ability to create BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), a protein that is essential for neural development and long-term memory. A high sugar diet may decrease BDNF, and having lower levels of this protein has also been linked to depression.





Brain Food

It's no surprise that many of the same foods that support mental health also support a healthy gut. Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, like salmon, are great for mental well-being. For a brain boost, eat a rainbow of non-starchy fruits and vegetables for your brain and gut such as; asparagus, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, avocado, cherries, oranges and more. Nuts, seeds, and legumes are great brain food also. To build a healthy gut, include probiotic-rich fermented foods like sauerkraut, kimchi, kefir, and yogurt.

A diet that supports the brain-gut axis should never sacrifice taste! Many herbs and spices not only increase flavor but can also improve brain function. Sage, turmeric, cinnamon, saffron, and black pepper all support a healthy brain and gut function. Adding flavor without adding unnecessary fat or sugar is a primary focus for the culinary team here at Culinary Services Group when building custom menus for behavioral health clients.

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Just a Taste of What We Do

Try this light lunch idea that's good for your gut & your brain.

Turkey California Wrap

Ingredients
(makes 4 servings)

4 Whole Wheat Tortillas

1.5 Cup Smoked Turkey Breast

2 Fresh Avocados, Thinly Sliced

1/3 Cup Chipotle BBQ Sauce

½ Cup Alfalfa Sprouts

Preparation

Carefully slice the avocadoes in thin slices. Spread 1 Tbsp of BBQ sauce on one side of the tortilla. Arrange thinly-sliced avocado, chopped turkey and sprouts on the BBQ spread side of tortilla. Fold tortilla at bottom, fold in sides, then roll from bottom to top. Slice the wrap in half or thirds for easy handling.



You Are Not Alone

Americans that live with mental illness know the value of finding quality care and support. Help your treatment center stand out with a dining experience that blends the culinary arts with leading nutritional science.

While we're only just beginning to understand the connection between our gut, its microbiome, and our brains, one thing is clear, good nutrition is key to supporting a healthy body and mind. As a healthcare food service provider, we align ourselves with our behavioral health clients' goals and join them in the fight to end the stigma of mental illness. We aim to support healthy, fulfilling lives for those who live with mental illness through nutritional support and education.



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Contact:

1-844-CSG-FOOD
(1-844-274-3663)

1135 Business Pkwy S
Westminster, MD 21157

culinaryservicesgroup.com

info@csgfood.com

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