

Let's Talk...

LET'S
TALK
GUTS

The gut-brain connection

Did you know your gut and brain are in constant communication? If you've ever felt butterflies in your tummy when nervous or had a gut-wrenching feeling during a stressful time, you've experienced this connection firsthand. It's not just in your head.

Do your gut and brain actually talk?

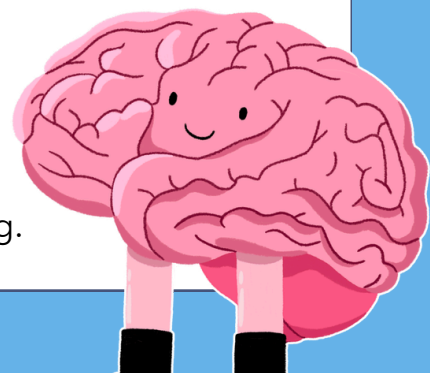
Your digestive system and brain are hardwired to talk to each other every single second of the day. Together, this two-way communication line is known as the gut-brain axis (also known as the gut-brain connection) and it plays a huge role in managing both your digestive comfort and your emotional wellbeing.

With so much information about gut health and mindfulness out there, it can be tough to separate fact from fiction. The recommended approach to supporting your gut-brain connection involves understanding how stress affects your gut, and using simple, everyday lifestyle habits to keep that communication smooth, rather than relying on quick-fix products.

What is the gut-brain connection and why does it matter?

Your brain and gut are physically and chemically linked. The main pathway for this communication is the vagus nerve, a huge nerve that runs directly from your brain stem all the way down to your gut.

- **Brain to gut:** When you experience stress, anxiety or excitement, your brain sends signals down to your digestive tract. This can alter how fast food moves through your gut (gut motility), increase pain sensitivity, and even change the secretions in your tummy.
- **Gut to brain:** It works the other way too! Your gut is often called your second brain, because it contains its own intricate nervous system (the enteric nervous system) and produces around 90% of the body's serotonin - a chemical that regulates mood. A happy, calm gut sends positive signals back up to the brain, promoting a sense of wellbeing.



What happens when the gut-brain connection is interrupted?

When the communication between the gut and brain gets disrupted, often by chronic stress, the signals become scrambled. This can lead to digestive symptoms like bloating, nausea, cramping and changes in your bowel habits, even if there is no digestive condition present.

Top tips for supporting your gut-brain connection

1. Practice mindful eating

How you eat is just as important as what you eat. When you rush through meals or eat on the go, your body stays in 'fight or flight' mode, which stops your digestion from performing at its best. Try to sit down, take a few deep breaths before your first bite, and chew your food thoroughly to signal to your brain that it is safe to relax and digest.

2. Build stress-busting habits

Because the brain impacts the gut so directly, managing daily stress as much as possible is a powerful way to soothe a grumpy tummy. Finding activities that help you unwind, whether that be a brisk walk, reading a book or simple deep-breathing exercises, can physically calm the vagus nerve and help to ease tension in your gut.

3. Keep moving gently

Regular, moderate exercise like walking, swimming or cycling is a fantastic way to stimulate normal gut contractions and reduce stress hormones. You don't need to do high-intensity workouts. Gentle, consistent movement is often the kindest choice for a sensitive gut-brain connection.

Good to know:

Taking steps to calm your mind can actively reduce physical digestive symptoms like bloating or cramping, while looking after your digestion can lift your mood. It's a team effort! If you try relaxation techniques, give them a few weeks of consistent practice to let your nervous system adapt.



Want to know more about how to look after you gut?

For information and guidance, go to gutscharity.org.uk/information or contact our Helpline on **0300 102 4887** or go to gutscharity.org.uk/helpline. We're here if you need us.



Top tips for supporting your gut-brain connection continued...

4. Prioritise consistent sleep

A disrupted sleep cycle can negatively impact both your mood and gut health. Aim for a regular bedtime routine to support your naturally inner clock (circadian rhythm), which your gut bacteria and digestive tract rely on to repair and rest overnight.

5. Nourish your gut microbiome

Your gut bacteria talk to your brain too! By eating a varied, plant-rich diet full of colourful fibres, you feed the friendly microbes that produce mood-regulating chemicals. A well-fed microbiome helps keep the messages travelling up to your brain positive and calm.

A gutsy tip: The lunch break swap!

Eating your lunch whilst typing away at your desk or scrolling through stressful news keeps your body in a low-level 'fight or flight' state. By mid-afternoon, this can leave you feeling bloated and uncomfortable. Swap the screen for 15 minutes of quiet time or have your lunch outside in the fresh air. Your gut and brain will thank you!

Please note that this information is intended to provide general health and lifestyle information and is not intended for people living with a digestive condition. If you have a diagnosed digestive condition and need tailored information about diet or stress management, please speak to your healthcare team or a gastroenterology dietitian.



Looking for more information on digestive conditions and symptoms?

For information and guidance, go to gutscharity.org.uk/information or contact our Helpline on **0300 102 4887** or go to gutscharity.org.uk/helpline. We're here if you need us.

