***Trust Your Gut! Digestion Matters.***

As the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables from local farm stands draws near, I tend to get a bit nostalgic. I imagine their vibrant colors and crisp textures promising a burst of flavor with every bite. As a child, I was able to indulge in such abundance right in my own backyard, thanks to parents who tended a wonderful garden every season - tilling, planting and harvesting. I grew up eating whole foods along with other homemade delights lovingly prepared with the freshest ingredients. I didn’t know at the time (nor would I have cared) that those foods provide the fiber needed to build good bacteria and guard gut health.

It’s only in recent years that the focus on gut health has come to the forefront.

I’m sure you’ve heard the saying “you are what you eat.” Well…that’s semi-true. That statement gains more credibility when we are actually absorbing the nutrients from what we ingest. A healthy digestive tract breaks down food into nutrients that the body can absorb and use. An inflamed digestive tract is not equipped to do that. So even if you are eating the right foods, you may not be getting the nutrients you need. If you have symptoms like stomach pain, bloating, constipation and such, you are more apt to look for a solution. However, Dr. Anna Toker, a leading Colorectal Surgeon from Mansfield Texas, points out there are other signals people don’t attribute to an unhealthy gut such as arthritis, high blood pressure, diabetes, and metabolic disease.

New research shows that a healthy gut helps with more than digestion and nutrient absorption. It can also help to boost the immune system, control our metabolism and help to prevent chronic disease. In addition, it affects our mood and our mind. (Have you ever experienced an emotion, and actually felt it in your gut?) The gut and brain are connected and communicate through what is called the gut-brain axis. According to these studies, the bacteria in our gut can produce chemicals that affect how we feel, like serotonin, (often referred to as the feel good chemical). If our gut isn’t healthy, the opposite is true and we can feel sad or anxious.

So why didn’t we know this before? It seems in the past, there wasn’t much education on the topic and how the gut affects other parts of the body, like the brain. The focus was more on harmful bacteria and we lacked the necessary technology. The gut microbiome is very complex and different for everyone. Things like diet, genetics, and lifestyle affect it and it took scientists a long time to understand how it works. We now know that taking better care of our gut can affect overall health.

So now that we know, what can we do? There are simple ways to make small changes.

**Exercise Gets You *Moving*!:** The benefits of exercise on gut health are impressive. The digestive tract is a muscle - exercise is good for all our muscles, gut included. Exercise boosts circulation, sets you up for a better night’s sleep and helps to move things along. (Yet another reason why choosing a sedentary lifestyle is a bad idea.)

**Process This:** If you’re wondering why it seems more and more people you know are suffering with a digestive issue, it’s likely because as a society, we’ve become overly-dependent on over processed foods. Choosing whole foods above processed foods promotes healthy digestion.

**Chew Your Food:** Chewing is the first step in digestion! This is an area where I am lacking for sure. I eat on the run a lot and know I don’t chew my food well enough. At least 30 chews is recommended for most foods. Foods like oatmeal, 20 and for foods such as steak or chicken, 40. Chewing breaks food down into smaller particles and signals the body to produce digestive enzymes. Without proper chewing the body may not absorb nutrients well.

**Thank Your Doc!:** Antibiotics can harm healthy gut bacteria because they do not discriminate between “good” bacteria and “bad”. *Overuse* can cause problems. So, the next time you’re demanding an antibiotic (let’s face it, we’ve gotten used to a quick fix) and your doc is not willing to prescribe, this may be the reason. If so, say “thanks for caring about my gut.”

**Proper Supplements:** While nutrition should be the foundation, we can’t always get all we need from food. Ongoing research suggests adding a prebiotic/probiotic supplement to your diet may help improve gut health. Prebiotics provide “food” meant to promote the growth of beneficial gut bacteria, while probiotics are live good bacteria. There are many options available, so do your due diligence and consult with a trusted professional to find what’s best for you.

**Address Stress:** Chronic stress can cause an imbalance of gut bacteria by increasing the bad and decreasing the good which can cause various issues. A 2019 article from the National Institute of Health states, “Stress can affect health through its impact on gut bacteria.” Yoga and mindful meditation are simple ways to reduce stress. Just a few minutes a day can make a difference.

Gut health is important. Studies show its impact on multiple major functions. As always, be certain to address concerns with your healthcare professional. Now that we know more, we can do more. But whatever you do, don’t ignore that gut feeling.

*Now that I know better I plan to do better by chewing my food well and eating more slowly in order to better absorb nutrients. How about you? Let me know at joann@wellnessfusion.net. Remember this monthly article is here for you, For the Health of It!****JoAnn Begley is a Holistic Wellness Practitioner, Certified Nutrition Coach and Reiki Master with 25 years experience in holistic wellness therapies.***