

How stress may be harming your gut health

East Anglian nutritionist Emma Jamieson explains how your lifestyle may be affecting your digestive system - and how to remedy it. By **Danielle Lett**



It's no surprise that stress is linked to a number of health and medical conditions.

While most commonly associated with issues such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and depression, did you know stress can also wreak havoc on your gut health?

"The effect of stress on our digestive system is thanks to something called the gut-brain axis," explains registered nutritional therapist and health coach Emma Jamieson.

"This is a two-way pathway running between our gut and our brain, with the central nervous system connecting the two. Nerves within the intestinal lining (the enteric nervous system) are known to communicate directly with the brain, and vice versa.

"What this means is that when stress and tension is perceived in the brain, it is immediately communicated to the gut, where similar feelings may be experienced as a result."

Altered gut motility is a known symptom of both short-term and prolonged stress, and is the speed of food and/or stools passing through the digestive tract. This can both be increased or decreased by stress.

"Do you find you make more frequent trips to the loo when you're under pressure? Or maybe you notice that in periods of chronic stress you just can't 'go' at all. Paradoxically both diarrhoea and constipation are linked to increased stress," says Emma.

"If you imagine nerves within the enteric nervous system being fired up by stress, then it will

come as no surprise that conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) are exacerbated when stress levels rise. In fact, stress may be a trigger for IBS in the first place, with symptoms including pain, bloating, flatulence and the aforementioned diarrhoea and/or constipation.

"It is often the case that until underlying causes of stress are addressed, IBS cannot be fully resolved. In some extreme cases this might involve changing jobs, re-evaluating home life and making changes to other causes of ongoing stress before digestive symptoms start to improve."

On the flip side however, an unhappy gut can add to the body's stress load itself. "Just as the brain influences digestion, any disruption to the status quo in the gut can be detected by the brain." A number of causes can lead to this - some of these include:

Inflammation within the gut lining, possibly as a result of a condition such as inflammatory bowel disease, or due to an overgrowth of pathogenic bacteria. Ongoing intestinal permeability issues, known as a 'leaky' gut - ironically possibly triggered by stress in the first place, where gaps between the cells in the gut lining allow food particles, toxins and bacteria to pass through into the blood stream. Dysbiosis - where levels of beneficial bacteria are outnumbered by pathogenic strains causing an unhealthy gut environment. Unwanted visitors such as parasites, yeasts and/or pathogenic bacteria. Signs of



these include a stomach upset after travelling abroad, a history of having taken several courses of antibiotics, or feeling worse after eating foods that contain yeast such as bread, beer, and vinegar. Recurrent thrush is also a sign of a yeast overgrowth. Underlying food sensitivities which add to the body's stress load.

"When anxiety from daily life is already challenging the body, working to resolve these issues may go a long way in helping to improve digestive function and

the associated symptoms," adds Emma.

There are a number of things you can do to help improve your gut health, such as eating more fruit and veg each week.

"Aim to cover half your plate, if you can. Taking a probiotic supplement or introducing fermented foods to your diet will also help, as will taking time to eat with no distractions. Chewing each mouthful carefully can make a huge difference to the entire digestive process."

And reducing stress itself is key to helping repair your gut.

"As you will know, this is often easier said than done. But self-care plays a huge role in this, so try taking time out to focus on your mental wellbeing on both a weekly and daily basis.

"Try focussing on calming and slowing the breath, both before meals and at points during the day when stress levels are starting to rise. Getting outside in nature on a daily basis, whatever the weather, is another great stress

Wellbeing



Digestive conditions such as IBS are exacerbated when a person is stressed
 Pictures: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Below: Registered nutritional therapist and health coach Emma Jamieson

Picture: REBECCA LEWIS, POSHYARNS PHOTOGRAPHY



reliever, or how about gentle exercise each day such as walking, swimming, or dancing around the kitchen to your favourite song?

“And if you suspect that gut issues may be a contributing factor to your overall stress, then working with a nutritionist to identify possible causes and support your digestive health could be a good place to start.”

To find out more about Emma and the work she does, visit emmajamieson.co.uk

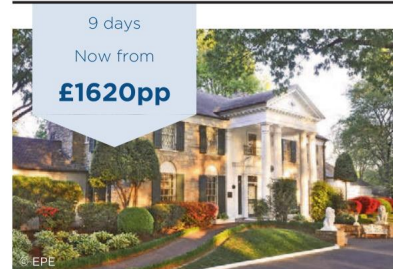
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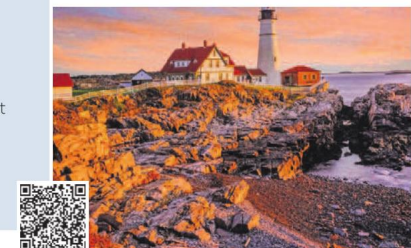


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