

Local

Yogurt -- food for thought?

By: Tara Maltman-Just

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January is Alzheimer Awareness month. Alzheimer's disease and dementias affect many Manitobans -- one in three of us has a family member or close personal friend who has been diagnosed.

One patient of mine was a caregiver for her father with Alzheimer's for years. Always on the go, she was run down by stress and recurrent sinus infections, that were treated with antibiotics. She began feeling anxious, sad and had bouts of diarrhea. Antidepressants were not her full solution: Several billion micro-organisms came to her rescue as well.

Improving brain health is a topic on the minds of many. I often field questions on preventive medicine and brain fitness in my practice, and there is one theme that is overlooked by most: the gut-brain connection.

There is a definite relationship between the gut (our stomach and intestines) and the brain. In fact, 90 per cent of the body's main "happy" neurotransmitter serotonin, is found in the gut. Often referred to as our second brain, the gut sends data to the brain on more than whether we're hungry or full -- giving a whole new meaning to the expression "gut feeling."

So if we have poor digestive function, it can affect our brain and could even lead to depression, anxiety or insomnia.

There's some tantalizing literature on the topic. One recent study from UCLA, published in *Gastroenterology*, showed eating probiotic food for four weeks altered brain function. Through functional magnetic resonance imaging, researchers found participants who ate probiotic yogurt twice daily had improved connectivity among key brain areas. Further studies show probiotics may alleviate depression, anxiety and stress.

With my my aforementioned patient, her frequent antibiotic use destroyed some good bacteria along with the bad. Combined with chronic stress, this gut imbalance compounded her emotional pain, leaving her with diarrhea and symptoms of anxiety, both of which resolved after only three weeks of proper probiotic supplementation. This is why I believe treating the person, not just the disease, is so critical. Your body systems do not operate in isolation.

If you are taking antacids, antibiotics or pain-relievers, your pH, good bacteria or intestinal lining may be altered, impairing digestion and absorption of nutrients that are the building blocks of your neurotransmitters.

Before you rush out to purchase some yogurt, here are a few helpful hints: Watch for hidden sugars, which can offset the benefits of the probiotics by fuelling other gut inhabitants such as yeasts (sugar is their favourite food). Choose a combination of bacteria, such as lactobacillus and bifidobacter strains. Pharmaceutical-grade probiotic supplements usually work best when taken on an empty stomach. I often recommend specific strains for each patient, so ask your practitioner what's best for you.

Did you know one high-potency probiotic yogurt will generally contain only about one billion units of good bacteria? This may sound like a lot, but many people need 10 to 50 billion units to achieve desirable outcomes. That is a lot of yogurt! Now there's some food for thought.

Tara Maltman-Just is a clinician and licensed pharmacist at Vitality Integrative Medicine in Winnipeg. She focuses on treating the person, not just the disease to help people live better, more balanced lives. www.vitalityintegrativemedicine.com

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