

# To your health

## Good Guts and Happy Brains

**F**ollowing the excitement and celebrations of Christmas and New Year, January can seem like a long month. It is also one of the colder and darker months without the warming glow of Christmas lights!

The transition from autumn to winter can often cause a dip in mental health. Shorter days and reduced light exposure appear to trigger Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) with symptoms often starting in October and reaching a peak in January. However, increased time spent on smart phones, laptops, tablets may also contribute to SAD. Some are even more affected with depression, which can be exacerbated by the cold and the dark.

These "Winter blues" affect around 5% of the population, however, another 10-20% may experience a milder version of it (that's 1-2 people out of 10). This estimation rises in those who live in Northern latitudes and appears to affect more women than men; especially females aged 20 to 40.

Although reduced daylight is a prime contributor to SAD because the production of both vitamin D and the hormone melatonin (regulates mood, sleep/wake cycles, digestion and energy) are affected by sunlight, the origin of SAD and even general depression may not actually start in the brain. In fact, symptoms such as sadness, anger, increased anxiety, depression and fatigue are often linked to the development of inflammation and/or an infection in the intestinal tract.

### The gut – brain connection

The gut is home to our "second brain" which is known as the enteric nervous system (ENS). This is why what affects our intestines also affects our brain and vice versa. The long cable-like Vagus nerve connects the GI tract to the brain, creating constant communication through chemical feedback. Usually this communication functions well but when things are out of balance, depression, SAD and anxiety can arise.

Unlike the brain, the gut is designed to deal with exposure to undesirable invaders from the world outside the body. However, studies have shown that when levels of inflammation are increased in the gut, it can result in increased inflammation in the brain as well. This affects important brain chemicals, such as our feel-good neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine which are primarily produced in the intestines.

### Dietary choices for a better mood

With more than 90% of the body's serotonin produced in the gut, our diet plays a significant role



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in our mental health. After the holiday season of partying and increased sugar from sweets and alcohol, the delicate balance of the microbiome can be at risk. Here are some tips to rebalance the gut and the brain:

► **Eat your veggies:** Vegetables are rich in antioxidants and plant chemicals that reduce oxidative damage and symptoms of depression. They are also rich in fibre to support the gut microbiome and balance blood sugar levels. Aim to eat extra veggies in stews, salads, wraps, and soups (aim for a minimum of 5 servings per day).

► **Increase protein:** Eat protein-rich foods to provide the building blocks (amino acids) tryptophan (for serotonin production), tyrosine, phenylalanine (adrenaline production) and taurine (has calming effects). Good sources are oats, seeds, nuts, tofu, poultry, lentils, fish and eggs.

► **Don't fear fat!** The brain is largely made of fat and essential fatty acids like omega 3 and 6 are vital in supporting the proper function of cells and transmission of messages throughout the brain and nervous system. Consume oily fish like mackerel, herring, sardines and trout. Seaweed, pumpkin seeds and hemp seeds are good vegan sources.

► **Reduce alcohol:** Although some feel it boosts self-esteem and mood, alcohol actually depletes the mood boosting brain chemicals serotonin and dopamine, leaving you feeling low afterwards. Drink warming teas and for a treat try raw cacao hot chocolate. Raw cacao contains nutrients that are known mood boosters.

► **Reduce sugar:** This ubiquitous sweetener feeds the negative gut bacteria and can increase mood disorders.

► **Avoid stimulants:** including caffeinated drinks and smoking which can give an artificial high followed by lower mood soon after.

### Lifestyle mood boosting tips:

► **Eat mindfully:** Eating mindlessly leads to poor digestion. Sit down at a table away from the TV or computer and chew food well – avoid bolting food down. Without the proper breakdown of food the body may lack the essential nutrients vital for good mood.

► **Reduce blue light:** Turn off digital devices 60 minutes before bedtime. Darkness supports the natural production of melatonin to help you prepare for sleep. Consider downloading an app called FLUX on electronic devices or investing in some blue light blocking glasses.

► **Be active outdoors daily:** This increases the natural production of mood boosting chemicals in the brain.

► **Try something new:** It's the NEW YEAR so take up a new hobby to stimulate brain function and enjoyment during the darker season. ▴

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