

PRINT-New research: Parkinson's could start in your gut

If you need another reason to eat better, there's [new research](#) that indicates poor gut health has a strong connection to the development of Parkinson's disease.

There have been numerous studies suggesting gut health is linked to brain health and can influence the development of diseases such as Alzheimer's. Now, there's research results that specifically advance the idea that a person's gut microbiome and damage to the upper gastrointestinal tract significantly increase a person's risk of developing Parkinson's disease.

The study points out Parkinson's disease is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that affects 8.5 million people worldwide based on 2019 estimates. The number of cases has more than doubled over the past three decades. It is considered the fastest growing neurodegenerative disorder globally, even surpassing Alzheimer's, according to the World Health Organization.

Omar Khokhar, MD, a gastroenterologist with OSF HealthCare suggests there's a strong connection between damage to the lining of your gastrointestinal tract and the impact of damage on the rest of the body.

"There's this whole theory about absorbing things we shouldn't be absorbing, leading to systemic inflammation. And in this case with Parkinson's, is it neuroinflammation? Is it absorption of things you shouldn't be eating quickly or eventually, over time, could potentially accumulate in the brain to cause Parkinson's?"

The research involved more than 9,300 people who had a scope of their upper gastrointestinal tract, including their esophagus, stomach or upper part of the small intestine that required a biopsy. The study showed those whose mucosal lining was damaged had a 76% greater risk of developing Parkinson's disease during the follow-up period – an average of 14.9 years for the group.

It has been a long-held belief that Parkinson's disease has its origins in the brain, but now researchers see growing evidence it might begin in the gut. The latest study shows a strong correlation but doesn't definitely link problems with the gut lining as a cause of Parkinson's. However, Dr. Khokhar says it appears that gut health makes a big difference.

"If your gut lining is intact and strong, it will absorb what you should absorb for adequate nutrition, digestion and healthy living and not absorb what you shouldn't be absorbing."

According to the study, a protein called alpha-synuclein found in the gut can travel to the brain and form clumps called Lewy bodies, which are a hallmark of Parkinson's.

As he glances at a screen with research results, Dr. Khokhar says he looks forward to a day when a person's microbiome health could be evaluated through a blood or breath test, and then specific prebiotics or probiotics could be ordered to address deficiencies, much like what's done today with vitamins.

"Once we can get to this point where we can look at 'this is what you're eating and what you're eating is resulting in these different changes and levels of your specific microbiota,' that's where it gets really, really groundbreaking."

But, that type of precision medicine could be five to 10 years away. So until then, what's the best approach? Dr. Khokhar says it's important for anyone with gastrointestinal issues to improve their diet and be diligent about following up with regular check-ups. In fact, with increasing evidence that what we eat can impact gut and brain health, Dr. Khokhar says it's time for everyone to start paying more attention to what they eat.

"I challenge everyone who eats a granola bar or who eats a bag of Doritos or whatever the case may be. If I can't tell you and the scientists can't tell you what ingredients six through 22 are, should you really be putting that in our mouth? Or is there a trade off or is there a cost to that?"

What about prebiotics and probiotics? Should people be taking them to keep a healthy gut? Dr. Khokhar advises a better approach is to get those nutrients through food by regularly eating things such as Greek yogurt, kefir (milk or non-dairy based milk such as soy, coconut and water), sauerkraut, kimchi, pickles, miso, tamari (soy), kombucha, sour cream, cottage cheese and aged cheese.

If those are too challenging to include in your diet, Dr. Khokhar says to talk with your medical provider. If you feel better after taking prebiotics or probiotics, then go for it.