

Print – Script – Is stress eating at your gut?

Whether you're dealing with job loss, financial woes or embroiled in relationship issues, we all suffer from stressful situations from time to time.

No matter what the situation, stress is not good for our health in so many ways. It can impact our cardiovascular health, mental health, sleep and even our skin and hair. One of the biggest problems is how stress affects our gut health. Stress can cause diarrhea, constipation, bloating or make conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome or bowel diseases like Crohn's even worse.

"I know for a lot of people, the first thing that happens when they have something big and stressful coming up, they are running to the bathroom, or they don't go to the bathroom at all," says Nicole O'Neill, a dietitian with OSF HealthCare. "So, there's a definitive connection between stress and gut."

O'Neill says the reason for this is because the brain and gut are connected through nerves and gut bacteria. And the nervous system, which controls digestive functions, communicates with the brain through the vagus nerve.

"The vagus nerve is connected, literally from your brain to your gut, and it's one of our longest nerves," O'Neill says. "And if your brain is in distress, it directly connects to your gut and causes your gut distress. The opposite is true too. If your gut is in distress, your brain is in distress. It's all tied together."

Diet plays a major role in the relationship between stress and gut issues. O'Neill says when most people are stressed, they tend to reach for something unhealthy instead of fruits or vegetables, for example.

"When you're stressed out, do you eat the same as when you're not stressed out? Most of us don't. We trend towards wanting sweet things or salty things," O'Neill says. "They alter the chemical composition in your gut, which also alters the bacteria that can live in your gut."

O'Neill adds that bacteria is resourceful. For example, say you're a person who craves sugar when you're stressed. But more sugar in the gut leads to the growth of bad bacteria, which dysregulates the gut lining. The gut lining becomes more porous or leaky causing a disruption in the gut.

So, what's the solution? O'Neill says it starts with reducing the stress in your life. That can be achieved in several ways such as more physical activity or taking more time for yourself by reading, listening to music or spending time with friends. It also means learning to say no to things that stress you out, becoming a better manager of your time and working to stay positive during stressful times. And consider talking to a mental health professional.

As a dietitian, O'Neill says getting control of your diet should be a priority.

"If you eat an excellent diet, plenty of fruits and vegetables, lean meats, proteins, whole grains, then you're creating a safe environment for the good bacteria to grow, and that good bacteria allow your brain rest and relaxation."

If you experience stress and gut issues, you're not alone. O'Neill says it's a common problem among her patients.

"We see a lot of people that stress is driving their gut. And we see a lot of people that their gut is driving their stress," she says.

"It can flip flop either direction, but there are solutions. So, if you're struggling with your gut, if you're struggling with stress, getting the proper help that you need from any provider is going to help the other one."

For more information, visit the OSF HealthCare [website](#).