



Connection Between GI and Mental Health

During your GI appointment your gastroenterologist may have asked about stress, depression, anxiety, or other aspects of mental health and you may have wondered, “Why is my doctor asking about this?”

The answer to this very important question can be best explained through an understanding of the Brain-Gut Axis, a complex interaction between our brain and the digestive system that is in constant communication through a combination of nerves and brain cells.

This does not mean that the pain or other GI symptoms you are experiencing is “all in your head.” It does mean that due to this strong brain-gut connection, health related stress, as well as outside stressors, work or school problems, family concerns, anxiety and depression can significantly impact the health of your gut and vice versa. In fact, research has shown that chronic stress can directly impact brain function, gut motility and nerve sensitivity within the GI tract. In addition, studies of patients with irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel diseases (i.e., Ulcerative Colitis and Crohn’s Disease) have shown higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to healthy controls.

Different types of stress

We all experience stress at various times throughout life. Some forms of stress are easier to identify, such as figuring out how to pay an unexpected bill or having a tendency towards chronic worry. Other times one may feel they are not “stressed” but do notice they are constantly fidgeting, have difficulty relaxing, and always feel they “should” be doing something. This reflects a chronic state of physiological arousal, meaning the body is not getting an opportunity to engage the relaxation response, which is critical for GI health. In addition, research has shown that a history of trauma, such as early life stressors, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, combat exposure or medical trauma can have significant impact on how the brain interprets feelings of safety and protection, as well as the brain’s ability to manage pain.

GI Behavioral Health

Given the role of the brain-gut connection, Michigan Medicine Gastroenterology offers comprehensive services through the GI Behavioral Health Program to assist patients with managing the complexities of GI diagnoses. GI Psychologists will assess your needs and aid in creating an individualized treatment plan that can include stress management and relaxation training. They can also assist in identifying additional resources that may be helpful for one’s physical and mental health.

To learn more about the GI Behavioral Health Program visit:
<https://www.uofmhealth.org/conditions-treatments/gi-behavioral-therapy>