

Key to Brain Health Is in Your Stomach

Top neurologist reveals how “good bacteria” can stop dementia and keep your brain sharp into old age.

By Vera Tweed

There’s an old saying that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. While this may or may not be true, there’s strong evidence that for both men and women the gut is the way to staying mentally sharp, preserving memory, and staving off dementia throughout a long life.

“If we pay attention to our good gut bacteria, we can have a meaningful effect on reducing brain degenerative issues, for the first time in history,” says neurologist David Perlmutter, M.D., author of a fascinating new book called *Brain Maker: The Power of Gut Microbes to Heal and Protect Your Brain — for Life*.

“What we understand about virtually every neurodegenerative

condition is that the cardinal mechanism is inflammation,” he tells Health Radar, “and what goes on in the gut regulates the level of inflammation, from the top of your head to the bottom of your toes.”

Inflammation: Brain Enemy #1

In addition to underlying age-related mental decline, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, and other brain diseases, inflammation sets the stage for diabetes, coronary artery disease, cancer, arthritis, weight gain, depression, and attention deficit disorders.

But it can be reversed with foods and supplements that restore beneficial bacteria, also called probiotics — a term derived from Greek, literally meaning “for life.”

Finding Probiotic Foods

Probiotics, says Dr. Perlmutter, are naturally present in fermented foods. Yogurt is an obvious example, but any food fermented in brine, such as pickles or sauerkraut made the old-fashioned way, is a beneficial source.

Unfortunately, to save time and reduce production costs, many commercially pickled foods no longer undergo the natural fermentation process that produces probiotics.

Here's how to tell if a pickled food contains beneficial bacteria: If water and salt are listed as ingredients and there is no vinegar, the food is likely fermented and beneficial.

But also look for "live cultures" in descriptions on food labels.

For example, Bubbies sauerkraut, kosher dill pickles, kosher dill relish, and pickled green tomatoes (but not bread and butter chips) contain live cultures, which is noted on the label.

A typical serving size would be listed on a food label and in the case of condiments, is quite small.

If you haven't been eating any fermented foods and experience gas, try smaller or less frequent servings and build up gradually.

Dr. Perlmutter, an associate professor at the University of Miami School of Medicine who is in private practice in Naples, Fla., recommends eating a fermented food at least once or twice each day. In addition to naturally fermented pickles and sauerkraut, these are his top choices:

Yogurt: Choose either regular or Greek yogurt, preferably organic, as long as it contains live cultures and isn't loaded with added sugar, artificial sweeteners, or artificial flavors or preservatives.

If you don't eat dairy, coconut yogurt with live cultures works just as well.

Kefir: Another type of fermented dairy product, kefir is like a creamy, drinkable yogurt but contains a beneficial yeast and a somewhat different combination of probiotics than yogurt.

It also contains antioxidants.

Coconut kefir is a nondairy version.

Kombucha tea: Consumed for centuries in Asia and Eastern Europe, this is a fermented, fizzy tea that has become popular in the U.S.

Typically served chilled, kombucha contains a small amount of alcohol, which develops naturally during the fermentation process.

Kimchi: A traditional Korean condiment or side dish, kimchi is a combination of naturally fermented vegetables, with a spicy and sour taste.

The longer it ferments, the hotter the flavor. In addition to probiotics, it's also a good source of calcium and a variety of vitamins.

Other fermented foods: Fish, meat, and eggs can also be pickled using natural, probiotic-producing methods with brine.

5 Vital Probiotics

Although probiotic foods are essential, they are unlikely to provide sufficient beneficial bacteria to restore damage from today's environment.

Antibiotics are the chief killer of good gut bugs, and in addition to being common prescription drugs, they are in conventionally raised meat and poultry. Whenever possible, antibiotics should be avoided.

Pesticides and chlorine in water are other killers of both pathogens and beneficial bacteria.

Supplements are a simple way to augment dietary probiotics and restore gut health.

All probiotics help to digest food and absorb nutrients, maintain a healthy balance of gut bacteria and enhance immunity, but each type works in a slightly different way.

These, says Dr. Perlmutter, are ones to look for in supplements:

Lactobacillus acidophilus:

Makes lactase, the enzyme required to digest milk and other dairy foods, and vitamin K, necessary for healthy blood clotting. In women, it reduces growth of *Candida albicans*, the fungus that triggers yeast infections. And, it helps maintain healthy levels of cholesterol.

Bifidobacterium longum:

Improves the ability to digest dairy products, helps prevent diarrhea and food allergies, and works as an antioxidant.

In animal research, it also reduced anxiety and raised levels of the brain growth hormone, BDNF. And, it helps to keep cholesterol levels in check and reduces risk of cancerous growths in the colon.

Lactobacillus plantarum:

Fortifies the gut lining, which reduces the risk of leaky gut, whereby particles seep out of the gut into the bloodstream and trigger inflammation and autoimmune reactions.

In addition to regulating inflammation, it quickly digests protein, which reduces risks of food allergies and helps maintain healthy levels of brain friendly omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, and vitamins.

Lactobacillus brevis:Enhances the activity of natural killer cells that fight invaders, and increases levels of a growth hormone in the brain, called BDNF.

For women, it fights vaginosis, a common bacterial infection of the vagina.

Bifidobacterium lactis:Also called *Bifidobacterium animalis*, it improves digestive comfort, helps

to knock out pathogens that cause diarrhea, such as salmonella, and enhances immune defenses.

In one study, people who took it for a few weeks, in conjunction with a flu shot, had higher levels of protective antibodies than those who only received the vaccine.

Food Sources

Fermented dairy products, such as yogurt and kefir, contain *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, *Bifidobacterium lactis*, and *Bifidobacterium longum*.

Lactobacillus plantarum and *Lactobacillus brevis* are found in fermented vegetables, such as naturally fermented sauerkraut and pickles, and kimchi.

Cultured coconut and other cultured plant foods are good nondairy sources.

Without adequate probiotics, gut health is compromised, but because symptoms can be so varied, the connection may not be obvious.

Manifestations can range from food allergies, mood disorders, ADHD, and autoimmune diseases to memory loss, arthritis, and other conditions we typically consider age-related.

Both science and clinical experience shows that combination of probiotic foods

and supplements can help solve these devastating problems and restore good health.

Choose the Right Probiotic Supplement

The best probiotic supplements are those containing a blend of bacterial strains, not just one type. Quantities of probiotics are measured in CFUs, short for “colony forming units.” Dr. Perlmutter recommends taking a supplement containing a combination of vital probiotics, with 50 billion CFUs per serving. Take that amount once daily, preferably on an empty stomach. Combination probiotics are available in powders and pills. Look for one that is either refrigerated or encapsulated in a way that is designed to withstand stomach acid. Descriptions on packages should state if this is the case but if in doubt, check the manufacturer’s web site or call the company and ask. Liquid probiotics are also available, but typically don’t contain as many types of probiotics. On some products, the potency is guaranteed “at time of manufacture” or similar wording, which means the number of CFUs may be less by the time of purchase. Buy the freshest probiotics possible.