



The new mental health *BOOST*

Serving up beneficial bacteria could give your mind – as well as your body – the boost it craves

Already pop a probiotic supplement each morning? Maybe you're striving to reduce bloating or gas, which these gut-helpers are best renowned for. But now, scientists are focusing on certain strains of probiotic bacteria known as psychobiotics – new research reveals these can positively influence our mood and have an impressive impact on mental health. 'Psychobiotics may work to increase the absorption of

nutrients, which are supportive of brain health,' says nutritional therapist Libby Linford, founder of Surrey Centre for Nutrition. Want to give your mind a boost? Here's what you need to put on your plate.

The science bit

So, just how does 'good' bacteria give you a natural high? Psychobiotics can regulate the production of chemicals called neurotransmitters, such as

feel-good serotonin and dopamine. They act on the gut-brain axis (the two-way communication system between the environment in the stomach and the brain) via the vagus nerve. The idea is that modifying and improving this communication system through the use of psychobiotics could positively alter brain function and behaviour, assisting with mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, along with slowing down the rate of cognitive decline.

PROTECT YOUR GUT BUGS

Healthy lifestyle choices will help keep your mind and gut working in harmony. Here are the factors that can harm your 'good' bacteria...

- + **STRESS** Ongoing stress triggers the release of harmful hormones that can reshape the composition of the gut bacteria.
- + **SMOKING** Need another reason to quit? One study found significant changes in the gut flora of cigarette smokers – particularly an increase in the bacteria linked to a higher risk of colon cancer.
- + **ALCOHOL** Heavy drinking can lead to a disruption in the gut

microbiome, resulting in an overgrowth of bad bacteria.

- + **MEDICINES** Even in cases of short-term use, some medicines (such as antibiotics) can affect the diversity of the gut flora.
- + **LACK OF SLEEP** Studies suggest that the make-up of your gut microbiome is linked to sleep quality.
- + **INACTIVITY** There is evidence to prove that people who engage in regular exercise have a healthier gut.

Modify your diet

The good news is, making the most of these beneficial bacteria is as simple as adding gut-friendly foods to your diet. 'Certain foods bring benefits not only due to the bacteria they contain, but also because they are supportive of the health of the gut,' says Libby.

YOUR SHOPPING LIST

Increase your intake of these gut-friendly probiotic food and drinks:

- + **Kimchi**
- + **Sauerkraut**
- + **Tempeh**
- + **Kefir**
- + **Kombucha**
- + **Miso**
- + **Yogurt with live cultures**
- + **Sourdough bread**

In fact, in 2022, scientists at University College Cork, in Ireland, undertook a month-long psychobiotic diet trial. Interestingly, they found that following a daily diet that included two to three portions of fermented foods, six to eight servings of fruits and vegetables, five to eight servings of grains, and three to four weekly servings of legumes led to a greater reduction of perceived stress and better sleep.

Fill your plate

And that's not all. Eating more prebiotics will also help to ensure a thriving environment within the digestive tract. So, try combining them with your psychobiotic diet. 'Prebiotics

are the fibres that feed probiotics – their food for strength and colonisation,' says Libby. 'Ensuring your diet has both will ensure a healthy gut.'

YOUR SHOPPING LIST

Prebiotics can be found in fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes:

- + **Apples**
- + **Artichoke**
- + **Onions**
- + **Cabbage**
- + **Mushrooms**
- + **Garlic**
- + **Oats**
- + **Flaxseed**

Boost levels of postbiotics

Want to turn around your gut health completely? Along with probiotics and prebiotics, postbiotics will also keep gut health on track and positively impact mental health. Postbiotics are active metabolites (the by-products left over after probiotics feed on prebiotics). They include special substances (called peptides and short-chain fatty acids), which allow good bacteria to thrive. Boost levels of postbiotics by eating more prebiotic foods like those listed above.



Did you know?

The gut environment is made up of trillions of bugs. Each of us has a unique microflora make-up, and when this is thrown out of balance it can cause physical issues, such as gas and bloating, along with raising levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

MAXIMISE YOUR SUPPLEMENTS

Want to top up with a pill? When browsing the aisles, ask these questions to find the best product for your needs...

1 WHAT STRAINS ARE IN THE PRODUCT?

It's a misconception that the more strains a supplement contains, the better it is for your health. 'Look for two of the most researched psychobiotic strains – lactobacillus helveticus and bifidobacterium longum,' says Libby. 'These have both been found beneficial in moderating the body's response to stress. Both strains have also been shown to reduce anxiety and depression.'

2 ARE THERE SCIENTIFIC STUDIES PROVING THE EFFICACY OF IT?

Seek out products that back up claims via scientific clinical trials rather than extravagant marketing terms, as these will deliver the best results. It might involve research, but will save you wasting your cash.

3 HOW DO YOU USE AND STORE THE PRODUCT?

Read instructions carefully. Most psychobiotics don't need to be taken with food, but some will need to be stored in the fridge to maximise effectiveness.