

Eat Yourself Happy this Winter - Ease the Winter Blues with Gut Healthy Leeks

Does the combination of darker nights and plummeting temperatures leave you feeling a bit down in the dumps? You're not alone. It is estimated that around one in three people feel they suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD) where the change in seasons and lack of natural light can leave sufferers feeling lethargic and depressed. But even if you just feel a little low from time to time have you ever considered that certain foods might help you feel happier and more energised?

One of the ways certain foods may improve your mood appears to be the role they play on our gut bacteria. Did you know that there are roughly 40 trillion bacteria living in and on you? Most of these bacteria reside in your gut. Many of these are essential not just for our physical health but also mental health. But to support a your friendly microbes you need to eat the right foods - known as prebiotics.

Prebiotic foods are high in special types of fibre that support digestive health. They promote the increase of friendly bacteria in the gut, help with various digestive problems and even boost your immune system.

Leeks are one of the top prebiotic foods to be eating this winter. Leeks contain up to 16% inulin fibre, an important prebiotic that helps promote healthy gut bacteria and supports the breakdown of fat. They are also rich in polyphenols which have also been shown to improve our gut flora.

How Does Our Gut Influence Mood?

The intestines and brain are connected physically and biochemically. The physical connection between the intestines and brain is through the central nervous system, which controls all of the activities of the body. The vagus nerve is a large nerve that sends signals between the intestines and brain.

The brain is also connected to the intestines through your gut microbes. Molecules that they produce can act as signals that the brain can detect. Our gut bacteria can produce an array of compounds, such as short-chain fatty acids, neurotransmitters and amino acids. Many of these substances have effects on the brain. For example, the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine and GABA, all play a key role in mood. When gut bacteria feed on prebiotic foods they generate other neuroactive chemicals, including one called butyrate, that have been linked to reduced anxiety and depression.

In addition, gut bacteria can also influence the brain and central nervous system by controlling inflammation and hormone production which can help the body become more resilient to everyday stress. Recent research has found that taking prebiotics can reduce the stress hormone cortisol which may in turn reduce anxiety and improve mood. Similar studies have shown that taking probiotic supplements and even yogurt regularly can reduce anxiety, stress and depressive symptoms in healthy people.

So if you want to boost your mood this winter try adding some leeks to your meals and feed your friendly microbes.

References

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