DMEC
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CONFERENCE

Mind-Gut Connection: Supporting Employees' Digestive and Mental Health at Work

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Introductions



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Learning Objectives

- Understand the prevalence and workplace impact of digestive and mental health conditions, including implications for healthcare costs and productivity
- Explain the mind–gut connection and its relevance to employee health and disability trends
- Identify strategies to design benefits and programs that address digestive and mental health holistically
- Apply practical approaches to reduce stigma, support diverse workforce needs, and optimize absence management outcomes



Mind-Gut Connection



Prevalence



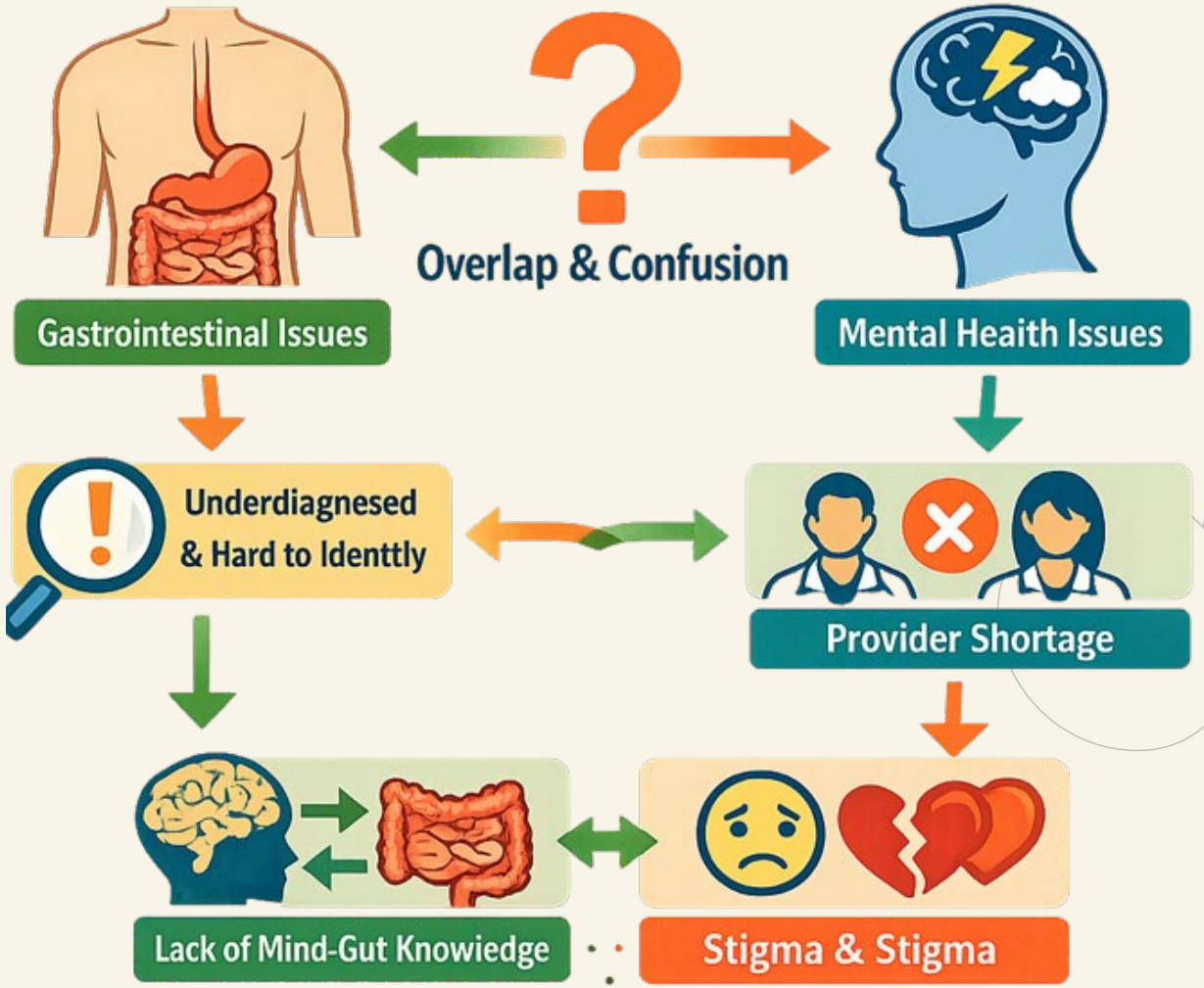
- Stress, anxiety and depression are tightly linked to gut health and vice versa[1]
- 40%+ of the global population meets criteria for at least one disorder of gut-brain interaction[2]
- Up to 70% of adults in the US report at least one digestive symptom monthly[3]
- Prevalence of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) in the US is 7-16%[3]
- Up to 1/3 of IBS patients also have anxiety or depression[4]

Impact

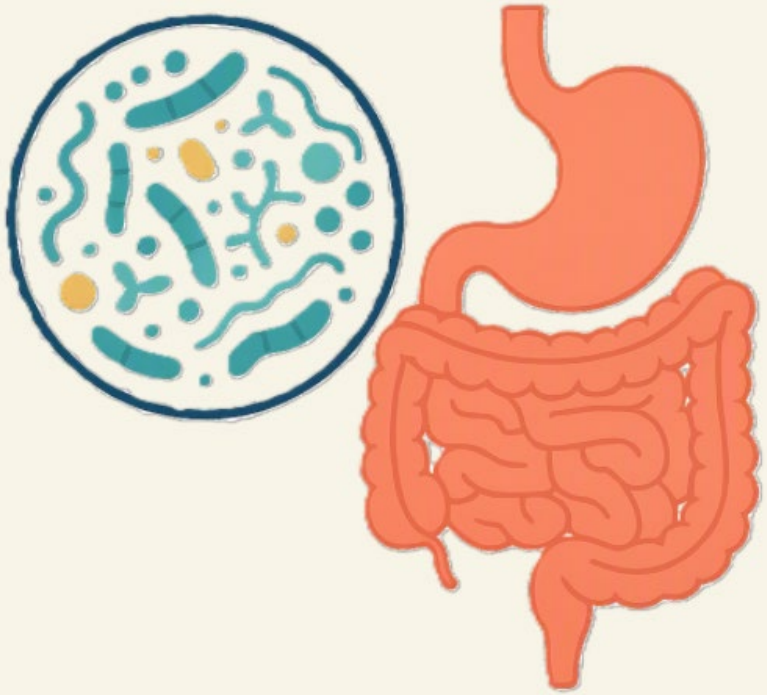


- Digestive health issues lead to significant productivity loss, causing individuals to miss ~17 workdays per year [1]
- 87% reported reduced productivity-nearly 14 hours/week lost output[2]
- GI problems are the primary cause of hospitalization and the second most common reason for short-term disability claims[3]
- Employer spending ranges from $14,000 annually for chronic functional GI disorders (e.g. IBS, heart burn) to more than $62,000 for individuals with Crohn's disease[5]

Challenges


Overlap & Confusion
Gastrointestinal Issues
Mental Heaith Issues
Underdiagnesed
& Hard to Identtly
Provider Shortage
Lack of Mind-Gut Knowiedge
Stigma & Stigma

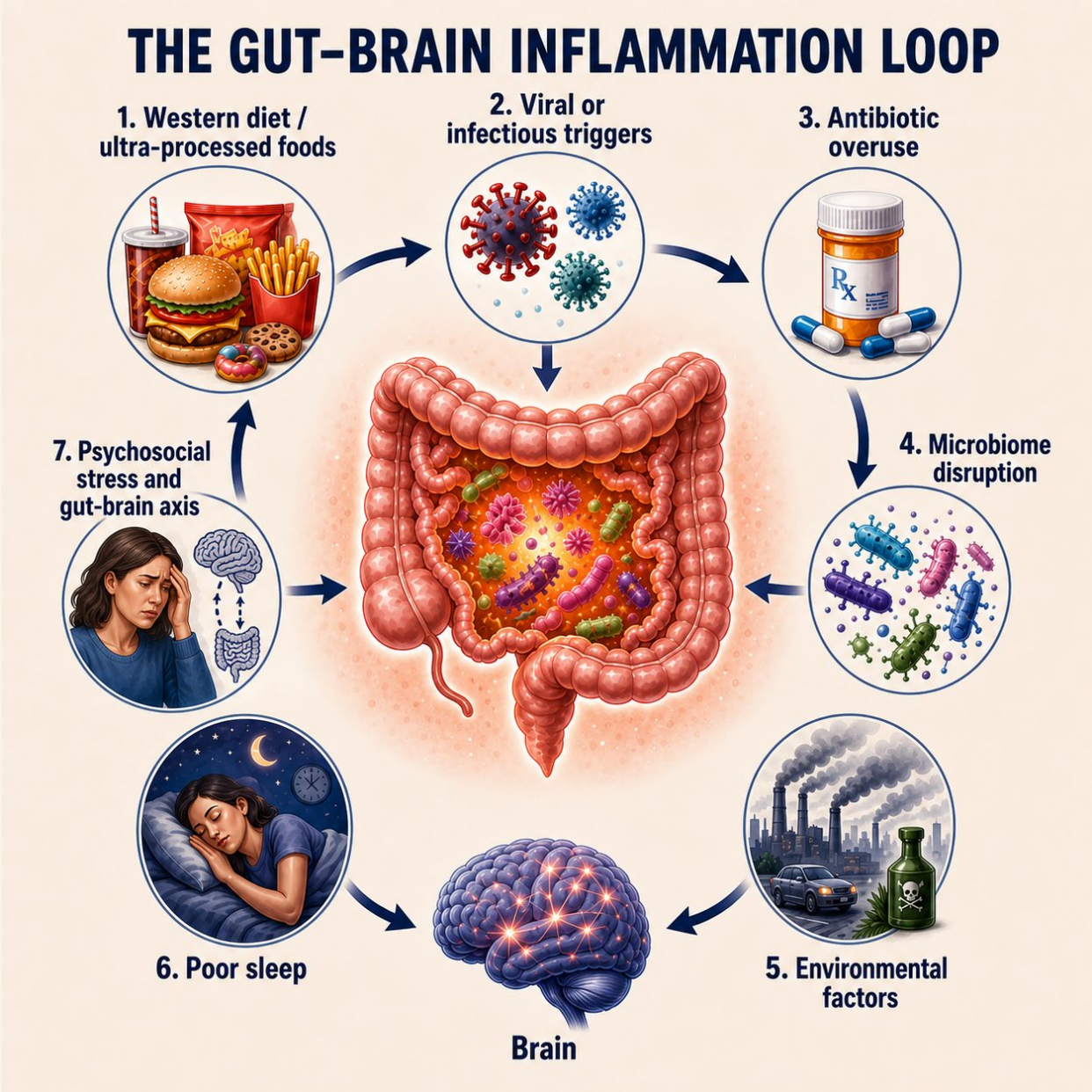
Microbiome



- Ancient origins[5,6]
- How the microbiome communicates[7,8]
- Without bacteria we'd be very sick[9,10]
- The Microbiome and Inflammation[11,12]
- C-Section Babies- A Real-World Example[13,14]

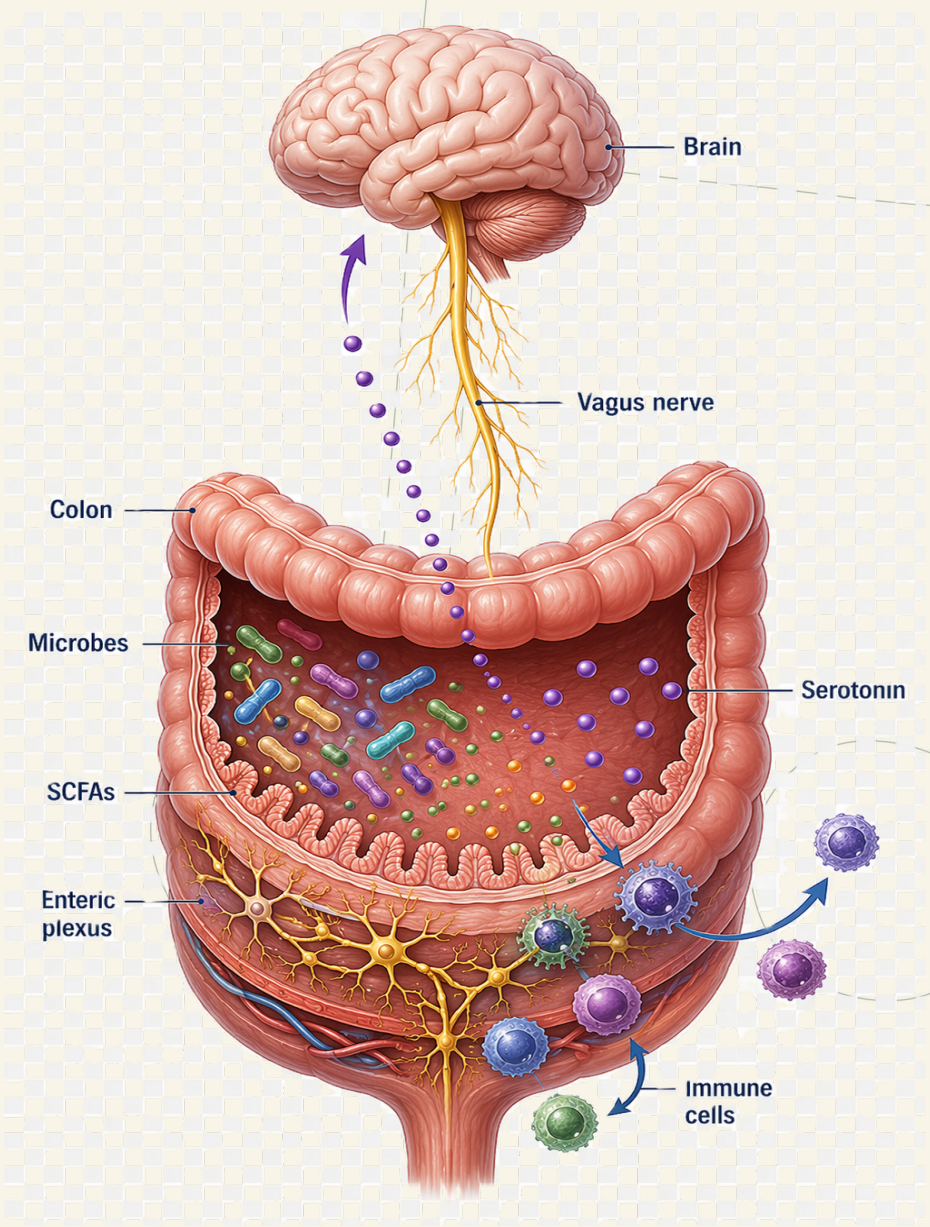
Why the Increase?

These factors ultimately converge on the same illness pathway to cause chronic low-grade inflammation in the body[15-24]



Gut-Brain Communication

- 200–600 million neurons, > your spinal cord[25]
- ~95% of serotonin is produced in the gut[26,27]
- ~70% of immune cells reside in the gut[28, 14]
- Low-grade intestinal inflammation⟶ Increased sensitivity ⟶ pain, bloating, urgency [27]
- Shared biology with genetic overlap between IBS and depression[29]
- The relationship is bidirectional: gut drives bra in, brain drives gut[27,30]



Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

What is IBS[30]

- A chronic disorder of brain–gut interaction
- Recurrent abdominal pain ≥1 day/week for ≥3 months, linked to changes in stool frequency or form (Rome IV)
- Subtypes: IBS-D (diarrhea), IBS-C (constipation), IBS-M (mixed)
- Diagnosed clinically — not a diagnosis of exclusion

IBS Impact

- Miss an average of 13.4 days of work per year which is nearly triple the rate of people without IBS[31]
- Their quality-of-life scores are worse than patients with diabetes or end-stage renal disease[31]
- Direct costs in the US alone are estimated at $1.5 to $10 billion per year, not counting medications[32]



New Standard of Care: 3 Equal Pillars

Behavioral



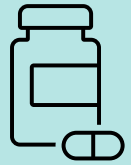
CBT, gut-directed hypnotherapy[33,34]

Dietary



Trigger identification, soluble fiber, low-FODMAP diet[34,35]

Pharmacologic



Evidence-based agents only (no centrally acting opioids) [33,34,35]

Employer Strategies

Supporting Employee Gut Health[36,37]

1. Redesign the food environment
2. Support physical activity
3. Support mental health
4. Protect sleep through scheduling
5. Build gut health literacy
6. Work to reduce stigma
7. Provide nutritional supports and resources
8. Create a culture of wellbeing
9. Review benefits for comprehensive coverage
10. Build a coordinated and integrated program



What Can Individuals Do

Feed Your Gut, Feed Your Brain[38,39,40,41]

- Follow the Mediterranean way of eating
  - Mostly plants: Aim for 30 different/week
  - ~30g fiber a day
  - Olive oil, beans, fish, nuts
  - Fermented foods: yogurt, kimchi, sauerkraut, kombucha
  - Cooled starches (resistant starch)
  - 32% reached remission vs 8%

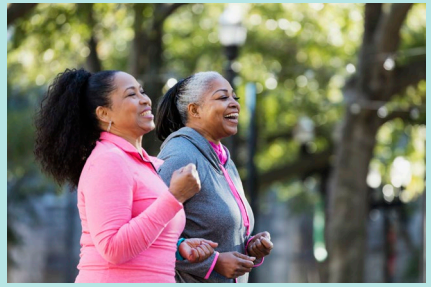


A pot of veggie-bean chili=1/3 of your plants per week. Herbs & spices count toward variety, too!

Move, Sleep, De-Stress

Three daily habits that feed your gut and calm your mind[42,43,44,45]

MOVE



Boosts gut diversity & butyrate:
Aim for ~150 min a week

SLEEP



Better sleep = more diverse microbiome:
Protect 7–9 hours, keep it reg

DE-STRESS



Calms cortisol & protects gut lining:
A few minutes of breathing daily

Questions?



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