

Gut Health and Your Heart

By Peggy Smith

If we stop and consider *gut health* and what that phrase means, we would likely say it relates to our digestion and whether or not we have indigestion. We might be aware that gut bacteria is a thing and some of us may have even read an article describing the mysterious connection between the gut and our brain, (and that our gut plays a role in how we feel emotionally). But we would not be as likely to say that a healthy gut impacts our cardiovascular health. It turns out it does!

“There’s a complex interplay between the microbes in our intestines and most of the systems in our bodies, including the vascular, nervous, endocrine and immune systems. All of these relationships are highly relevant to cardiovascular health.” Dr. JoAnn Manson, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of preventative medicine at Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

Some researchers at the University of Nottingham and King’s College London studied 617 middle aged female twins to see if there is a connection between diet and probiotics and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. What they found is that the women who had a lower diversity of healthy gut bacteria were more likely to have hardening of their arteries. So we add this association to the list of other problems a lack of diversity in healthy bacteria is connected to – diabetes, obesity, inflammation and bowel diseases.

“Inflammation impairs the function of blood vessels, and this is believed to be influenced by certain gut microbes. Chronic inflammation impairs the function of the inner lining of the blood vessels which results in stiffness, plaque formation and “hardening of the arteries.” Dr. Michael Miller – Center for Preventative Cardiology for the University of Maryland Medical System.

Another benefit of a healthy gut, that has been shown as it relates to our cardiovascular health, is in regulating blood pressure. This happens with the help of short chain fatty acids which are made almost exclusively in the gut! They are involved in blood vessel dilation and constriction. There are also bad bacteria, which, when allowed to grow out of control, have been shown to damage blood vessels which can lead to heart attack or stroke. The foods that can contribute to the growth of this bacteria are those high in unhealthy fats.

Clearly it is important to consider the role our diet is playing in every aspect of our ability to be well – but far beyond the science of how gut bacteria and the mechanics of the heart are related, I think it is important to recognize the significance of taking care of your heart in other ways too. Take care of your heart by moving throughout each day, particularly in ways that bring you joy. Breathe deeply several times a day intentionally, until the habit of deep breaths is just a part of who you are. And take time to think about the people, places and things that make your heart happy.

February is American Heart Month and a great time to consider ways we can take care of our heart health.

