



## A look at the link between mental health and gut health

Kelsey Rolfe | November 27, 2020



The mental-health impacts of isolation and quarantine are clear, but Canadians may not realize loneliness can also harm their physical health, said Diane McIntosh, psychiatrist and chief neuroscience officer at Telus Health, during *Benefits Canada's* 2020 Mental Health Summit on Nov. 12.

“There have been correlates that loneliness or isolation . . . is like smoking half a pack of cigarettes every day. It really does have an impact, not just on your mental health, but your physical health.”

While 2020 has been the “living embodiment of an annus horribilis,” the pandemic won’t end when January 2021 arrives, she said. Living healthy lifestyles and adopting appropriate coping strategies to deal with the ongoing uncertainty and stress will be

important, especially given that chronic mental-health issues such as depression and anxiety are inflammatory conditions.

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“When stress is severe, when it’s chronic, that inflammation develops over time and actually changes the way our brain is structured, how it functions and that increases our risk for physical illness. That inflammation is actually all built on our immune system and we actually have the ability to optimize our immune system.”

There are several steps people can take to boost their immune systems, including keeping coronavirus-safe by following public health rules and guidance around hand-washing, mask-wearing, keeping their social bubble small and getting a flu shot, said McIntosh.

In addition, they can take care of the healthy bacteria inside the gut called the microbiome, which plays a critical role in both physical and brain health. Doing so is easier than you think, she said, and comes down to staying hydrated and cutting back on alcohol, carbohydrates such as bread, cereal, rice and pasta and simple sugars. Vegetables, healthy fats and probiotic foods that are high in fibre also contribute to a healthy microbiome.

“I don’t want people to be afraid of food, but what I want to say is the way we’ve approached food — that fat is bad and carbs are good or better — is inaccurate. Fat is important, especially those healthy fats and Mediterranean fats, while simple carbs are drivers of inflammation. . . . The core of why carbohydrates, especially the more simple carbohydrates, are associated with depression is by driving inflammation, but also driving obesity, type 2 diabetes and other inflammatory illnesses.”

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Getting a good night’s sleep is also crucial to increase brain function, she said, noting poor sleep increases people’s risk of Alzheimer’s disease. As well, people should strive for daily physical activity, which offers numerous health benefits.

“All you need is about 30 minutes a day of mild to moderate intensity physical activity to grow brain cells, to protect yourself from stress, . . . [and] it is a depression treatment, believe it or not. You can’t yoga your way out of a serious depression, but for a mild depression and certainly as a maintenance treatment, exercise is critically important.”

Regular exercise also combats immunosenescence, the immune system’s gradual deterioration as the body ages and heightens people’s ability to fight off infections, added McIntosh.

**Read: [Most Canadians say employer should offer virtual health care: survey](#)**

During the session, she also stressed the value of virtual-care platforms in helping employees address their mental-health concerns, which cost the Canadian economy about \$50 billion per year in absenteeism, presenteeism and short- and long-term disability claims.

“The return on investment for offering mental-health resources is massive; it’s somewhere between \$2 and \$8 depending on what you do and how long you do it. We know that every dollar an employer spends brings dividends for the health and the productivity of their workforce.”

**Read more coverage of the [2020 Mental Health Summit](#).**

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