The role of gut microbiota in eating disorders: Emerging evidence and clinical implications.

Zhenxia Gui*

Department of Food Science, University of Peru, Peru

Introduction

The gut microbiota, a complex and dynamic community of microorganisms residing in the human gastrointestinal tract, has emerged as a critical factor influencing physical and mental health. Recent research suggests that the gut microbiome plays a significant role in regulating appetite, mood, and cognition, making it a potential contributor to the development and progression of eating disorders (EDs) such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Understanding the interaction between gut microbiota and EDs could open new avenues for therapeutic interventions [1].

The gut-brain axis, a bidirectional communication system linking the gut microbiota with the central nervous system, is essential in maintaining homeostasis. Through neural, hormonal, and immunological pathways, the gut microbiota influences neurotransmitter production, including serotonin and dopamine, which are implicated in mood regulation and reward processing. Disruptions in this axis have been observed in individuals with EDs, suggesting that gut microbiota dysbiosis may contribute to the pathophysiology of these conditions [2].

Several studies have documented alterations in the gut microbiota composition in individuals with EDs. For instance, patients with anorexia nervosa often exhibit reduced microbial diversity and an imbalance between beneficial and harmful bacteria. This dysbiosis is associated with increased intestinal permeability, inflammation, and altered metabolism, which may further exacerbate the symptoms of anorexia, including anxiety, obsessive behaviors, and altered satiety signaling. Similarly, individuals with binge eating disorder and bulimia nervosa have shown microbiota profiles associated with increased inflammation and impaired gut-brain signalling [3].

One of the primary mechanisms through which gut microbiota may influence EDs is through short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), which are metabolites produced by bacterial fermentation of dietary fiber. SCFAs, such as butyrate, propionate, and acetate, play a crucial role in modulating appetite and energy homeostasis. Research has indicated that individuals with EDs often have lower levels of SCFA-producing bacteria, which could contribute to dysregulated hunger and satiety cues, leading to disordered eating behaviors [4].

Another key factor is the impact of gut microbiota on inflammation and immune function. Chronic low-grade inflammation has been implicated in the pathogenesis of EDs, and gut microbiota dysbiosis can contribute to systemic inflammation through increased production of pro-inflammatory cytokines. This inflammatory response may further alter brain function and behavior, exacerbating anxiety, depression, and food-related preoccupations commonly observed in EDs [5].

The gut microbiota also plays a role in stress response regulation. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which controls the body's reaction to stress, is influenced by microbial metabolites and gut-derived signals. In individuals with EDs, heightened stress reactivity and dysregulated cortisol levels have been reported, potentially driven by gut microbiota imbalances. Restoring microbial balance through dietary and probiotic interventions may offer a promising strategy to mitigate stress-related exacerbations of ED symptoms [6].

Probiotic and prebiotic therapies have gained interest as potential treatments for EDs by modulating gut microbiota composition. Probiotics, which are live beneficial bacteria, have shown promise in improving mood, reducing anxiety, and enhancing gut health in both animal and human studies. Prebiotics, which serve as food for beneficial gut bacteria, can help promote the growth of SCFA-producing microbes, thereby improving metabolic and neurochemical balance. However, more research is needed to determine the specific strains and dosages most effective for ED treatment [7].

Dietary interventions also play a critical role in restoring gut microbiota balance in individuals with EDs. A diet rich in fiber, polyphenols, and fermented foods can support microbial diversity and enhance gut health. Conversely, highly processed diets high in sugar and artificial additives may perpetuate gut dysbiosis and contribute to ED pathology. Tailored nutritional strategies, guided by a multidisciplinary team, can help optimize gut microbiota and improve overall patient outcomes [8].

Fecal microbiota transplantation (FMT) has emerged as an experimental approach to restoring gut microbial balance in various conditions, including obesity and metabolic disorders. Preliminary studies suggest that FMT could potentially influence eating behavior and weight regulation, though its application in EDs remains in the early stages of research. Understanding the ethical and practical implications of FMT

***Correspondence to:** Zhenxia Gui, Department of Food Science, University of Peru, Peru. E-mail: zhenxia.gui@utp.edu.pe

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in this context is essential before it can be widely adopted as a treatment modality [9].

Despite the promising connections between gut microbiota and EDs, challenges remain in translating these findings into clinical practice. The heterogeneity of EDs, individual variations in microbiota composition, and environmental factors make it difficult to establish standardized interventions. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether gut microbiota alterations are a cause or consequence of EDs [10].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emerging evidence linking gut microbiota to EDs highlights the need for an integrated approach to treatment that considers microbiome health alongside psychological and behavioral interventions. Future research should focus on identifying microbial biomarkers for EDs, optimizing dietary and probiotic interventions, and exploring novel microbiome-targeted therapies. By addressing gut microbiota dysbiosis, clinicians may be able to develop more effective and personalized treatments for individuals struggling with EDs, ultimately improving both mental and physical health outcomes.

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