THE GUT BRAIN AXIS: AN EVOLVING PARADIGM IN HEALTH AND DISEASE

Ajit Pahari,[1] Sanjit Kumar Kar,[1] Bishal Joshi[1]

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

The gut-brain axis (GBA) is a communication network connecting the central and enteric nervous system, linking brain emotion and cognition with intestinal function. Recent research highlights the significant role of gut microbiota in these interactions, with dysbiosis shown to correlate with central nervous system disorders such as autism, anxiety, and functional gastrointestinal issues.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this article review and analysis of the available literature was done. Literature was searched from Google Scholar, Pub med, Meds cape and narrative review was performed using keywords Gut-brain axis, enteric nervous system, and irritable bowel syndrome. This review seeks to underscore the key findings from studies on GBA, including its configuration, the microbiota involved, clinical associations, and advancements in therapy.

RESULTS

The gut microbiotas, which comprise trillion of microorganisms residing within the gastrointestinal tract, actively contribute to gut-brain communication by producing an array of metabolites, neurotransmitters, and immune modulators. Dysfunction within this axis has been implicated in a spectrum of disorders ranging from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) to depression, anxiety, and neurodegenerative conditions.

CONCLUSION

The present study reveals important insights into the neuro-physiological and neuro-psychological mechanism linked to various health issues and mental disorders, potentially leading to new targeted therapies.

KEYWORDS

Gut-brain axis, Central nervous system, Enteric nervous system, Probiotics, Irritable bowel syndrome

1. Department of Physiology, Universal College of Medical Sciences, Bhairahawa, Nepal

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For Correspondence
Mr. Ajit Pahari
Department of Physiology
Universal College of Medical Sciences
Bhairahawa, Nepal
Email: ajitpahari@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The gut-brain axis (GBA) connects the central nervous system, which includes the body's physiological, biochemical, and physical components, to the gastrointestinal tract. Between the gut and the brain, it organizes a two-way communication network that involves neurons and other signaling molecules mediated by neuronal, endocrine, immunological, and microbial pathways. This pathway affects mood, emotion, digestion, cognition, and general health. This concept establishes a symbiotic relationship between the body and the gut flora and develops a holistic perspective of the human body. This interaction is essential to many physical functions, including immune responses, nutrition, and overall health and overall well-being. Encouraging knowledge of the GBA's function in physiology can help develop innovative treatment strategies for gastrointestinal, neurological, mental and metabolic illnesses.[1] While exploring the historical aspects, we can understand that ancient Greek physicians, including Hippocrates, proposed that gastrointestinal disturbances could influence emotions and cognition. In the 19th century, researchers began to link gut microbial composition to neurological conditions and diseases, but the field remained largely unexplored due to limited scientific evidences.The emergence of neuroscience and microbiology in the late 20th century provided a more systematic understanding of this bidirectional communication, particularly through neural, immune, and endocrine pathways. The discovery of the enteric nervous system (often called the "second brain") further established a concept that the gut plays a crucial role in regulating mood and behavior.[2] In modern days, due to the advancements and extensive research in the field of gut microbiome and neuroscience, the interest of the researchers in the Gut Brain Axis, has risen. Several studies have highlighted the influence of gut microbiota on the brain functions through microbial metabolites such as SCFAs (short chain fatty acids) and neurotransmitters like biological hormones. Researches on "dysbiosis -the imbalance of gut micro biota" have strongly linked it to neuropsychiatric disorders like depression, anxiety, and other neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. This has lead to the emerging therapeutic approaches that regulates and modulates the gut microbiome for mental and neurological health benefits by the administration of prebiotics and probiotics. Integrative researches in the modern days disclose complex interactions between gut microbes, mental health and immune responses, shaping new standards in neurogastroenterology and psychoneuroimmunology. Despite substantial advancements in understanding the GBA, several research gaps still exist in understanding the exact mechanism by which gut flora affect specific brain function. Most of the studies rely on animal models, so the studies like clinical trials are requires for validation and targeted therapies also need more rigorous investigation.

The aim of this review is to highlight the important findings of researches in GBA including its configuration, microbiota involved, clinical correlation and therapeutic advances.

COMPONENTS OF THE GUT-BRAIN AXIS

The GBA consists of

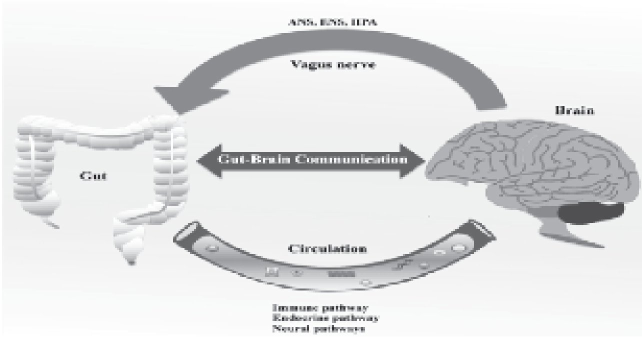

Figure1. Schematic diagram showing the communication between gut and brain

A. CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM (CNS)

The brain and spinal cord regulate the gut functions through direct and indirect mechanisms involving various nervous pathways and neurotransmitters. The vagus nerve performs a variety of functions such as monitoring and modulating multiple organs such as heart rate and gut motility and transmitting immunological signals from the peripheral body to the CNS for processing. Any change in the activity of CNS will affect the other associated organ systems.[3] The vagus signal from the gut can aggravate an anti-inflammatory response against the infections caused by the microorganisms. The brain function is affected by the gut microbes via the vagus nerve, thus any defect in the vagus nerve affects the regulation of behaviors.[4]

B. ENTERIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (ENS)

ENS is also known as the "second brain" due to its size, complexity, and the high degree of similarity of shared neurotransmitters with the central nervous system. The ENS produces neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and acetylcholine, which influences various physiological and biochemical functions of the gut and brain. The myenteric plexus controls motility, while the submucosal plexus governs secretion and blood flow. Enteric Glial Cells (EGCs) are specialized components of the ENS that provide support and protection to enteric neurons, influence neuronal activity, and ensure the maintence of the gut barrier's integrity.The ENS comprises a fully integrated sensory-motor reflex circuit, which consists of intrinsic primary afferent neurons (IPANs), interneurons and motor neurons situated in the gut wall. This circuit is essential for the regulation of gut activities such as motility, peristalsis, and the mucosal immunity of the intestines.[5] The ENS regulates gut motility, secretion, and blood flow independently while remaining influenced by the CNS via the vagus nerve and spinal pathways.

C. AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (ANS)

The sympathetic and parasympathetic division of the CNS control and mediates the gut activity through neural signaling, mainly through the vagus nerve (CN-X).The vagus nerve innervates vital organs of the body such as lungs, heart, spleen and GI tract and is responsible for the physiological processes such as regulation of heart rate, blood pressure, and digestion. It contains almost 80-90% unmyelinated sensory afferent fibers and rest 10-20% myelinated efferent fibers, thus the afferent nerve fibers play an important role in carrying various sensory information from the innervated visceral organs to the brain.[6] Those afferent signals are finally carried to the medulla (NTS) via the tuberous ganglion of the vagus nerve.[7] The NTS processes visceral sensory and chemical signals projecting them to the hypothalamus, locus coeruleus, amygdala and cerebral cortex contributing to the regulation of the ANS and emotional as well as cognitive functions. The intra-intestinal vagal fibers respond to mechanical movement, distention, and chemical changes in the GI tract and the extra intestinal vagal fibers respond to the mechanical movement, distention, and chemical composition changes at the receptors in the pancreas, liver, portal vein, and lungs.[8]

The vagal nerves in the pancreas, control glucose levels and insulin release.[9] Similarly, the liver and portal monitor fatty acid, amino acid, and glucose levels to maintain homeostasis. Afferent and efferent nerves interact closely and the vagus nerve maintains balanced functioning of the ANS via the bidirectional regulation between the visceral organs and the brain. This bidirectional vagal regulation extends beyond the heart, lungs, and digestive system, influencing immune response, inflammation control, emotional and cognitive functions, and maintaining homeostasis. It also regulates various physiological and neuropsychiatric conditions.[10]

D. HYPOTHALAMIC-PITUITARY-ADRENAL (HPA) AXIS

The HPA axis is one of the most important parts of Gut-Brain Axis (Figure-2).It plays an important role in mediating the stress response and regulating the interaction between the gut and brain.[11] The HPA axis, the core stress efferent axis, coordinates the organism's adaptive responses to stressors.[12] In response to stress; CRH is released by the hypothalamus which in turn stimulates the pituitary gland for the release of ACTH triggering the release of cortisol. The level of cortisol plays an important role in the gut permeability, digestion, absorption, metabolism and immunological functions of the body. Cortisol receptors are expressed on gut cells, including epithelial, immune, and enteroendocrine cells, suggesting direct effects on gut function.Cortisol can affect blood flow through the gut, its permeability and motility. Those mechanisms are promptly affected by stress-response system of the HPA axis. Moreover, cortisol can impact the functions of the brain by binding to glucocorticoids receptors located in various parts of the brain consisting the hippocampus, amygdala, and the prefrontal cortex.[13] The dysregulation of HPA axis caused due to chronic or prolonged stress can have negative effects on the Gut brain axis. Elevated cortisol levels alter the gut microbiome composition and increase in gut permeability leading to inflammation and brain dysfunction and various disorders associated with it.[14]

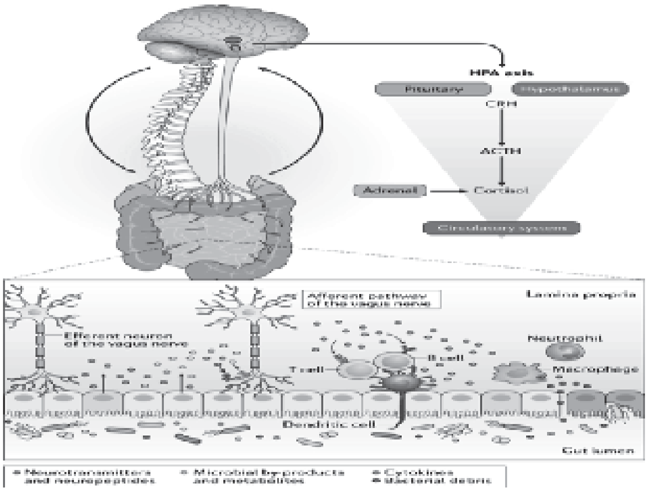

Figure 2. Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis is crucial neuroendocrinepathway.[15]

COMMUNICATION PATHWAYS

There is a significant impact of ENS on CNS. Generally, the gut and the brain are two different systems of the body with their own physiology. But in the context of gut brain axis the communication pathway majorly comprises of three distinct but interdependent pathways such as neural pathway, neuroendocrine pathway and immune pathway.[16] The neural pathway consists of the vagus nerve, the enteric nervous system, and the activity of neurotransmitters within the gastrointestinal tract. Through the neurologic modulation the nervous system can directly produce molecules that can act as local neurotransmitters such as serotonin, gamma amino butyric acid, histamine and acetylcholine etc. This pathway also produces the biologically active forms of catecholamine's in the lumen of gut.[17] The gut microbiota regulates nutrient availability, hence influencing the release of biologically active peptides from enteroendocrine cells which subsequently affects the gut brain axis. For example, the neuropeptide Galanin is thought to be involved in many critical neurobiological functions such as pain sensation, circadian rhythm, appetite, mood alterations, blood pressure regulation and other such neurotrophic functions. The central branch of HPA is stimulated by Galanin which influences the release of corticotropin releasing factor and adrenocorticotropic hormone, and thus finally enhancing the secretion of glucocorticoids from the adrenal gland.[18] And while talking about the immune pathway, the inflammation metabolism within the GI tract is influenced by the gut microbiota mainly through the immune systems with the release of cytokines such as interleukin-10 (IL-10) and interleukin-6 (IL-6) and other many cellular communication mediators such as interferon gamma, mainly during the time of gut dysbiosis. In irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), abnormal microbiota populations activate innate immune responses, increasing gut permeability, activating pain pathways, and dysregulating the enteric nervous system.[19, 20]

ROLE OF GUT MICROBIOTA

The role of microbiota in the gut brain axis has direct influence on central nervous system and enteric nervous system. The colonization of colon with a diverse group of microbes begins earlier in the life cycle of a baby particularly after the birth on exposure to the vaginal micro-flora and the mother's skin. This diverse group develops early in life and gets stabilized by the age of almost two to three years in life.[21] This early stage of the child manifests a period of critical phase of growth and development.A variety of microbial metabolites are also released by the gut microbiota which subsequently influences the brain functions. The impact of gut microbiota on gut brain axis has also been supported by studies regarding the manipulation of gut microbiota by the use of probiotics and/or antibiotics.[22] The gut microbiota communicates between the central nervous system and enteric nervous system through the production of several neurotransmitters with neuromodulatory properties and functions. Among them, serotonin, gamma amino butyric acid, histamine, glutamine, short chain fatty acids, branched chain amino acids, bile acids and catecholamines etc are the most important gut microbiota derived neurotransmitters that influences both directly and indirectly, the CNS and ENS functions.[23, 24] Gut microbiota in the gut brain axis not only maintains normal hormonal levels and metabolites but has also been implicated in the development of psychological and neurological disorders in case of gut microbiota dysbiosis.[25] The bidirectional communication between gut and brain is an important aspect that depicts the synergistic association of the gut microbiota with the host in approaching the signaling of gut brain axis in the regulation of host mental behaviors such as mood, cognition and behaviors.[26]

GUT-BRAIN AXIS IN HEALTH

The regulation of body's feeding habit is influenced by a wide variety of factors such as food quality, external environment pressures and the physiological state of the organism.[27] The regulation of stress response modulation by the gut brain axis has long been appreciated. Changes in the gut microbiota can affect how our bodies respond to stress, how anxious we feel, and how easily our stress response system is activated by the regulation of HPA axis.[28] Clinical, epidemiological and immunological evidence suggest that the gut microbiota significantly influences the gut-brain relationship, affecting mental state, emotional regulation, neuromuscular function etc. Research continues to explain the mechanisms of actions to explain the effects of gut microbiota both directly and indirectly on emotional and cognitive areas of the brain demonstrating the fluctuations of microbiome linked to the alteration in the system of communication. For instance, several mood disorders like anxiety, depression, and autism spectrum disorders are now known to be linked to functional GI disruptions. On the other hand, GI diseases like irritable bowel syndrome and irritable bowel disease often have psychological co-morbidities that are related to changes in the gut microbiome.[29]

GUT-BRAIN AXIS IN DISEASE

Functional gastrointestinal disorders (FGIDs) are much more common and cause a lot of trouble for people's health and well-being. They are a mix of different conditions with no clear cause. It is believed that FGIDs happen when the gut and brain communicates to each other through the gut-brain axis. The brain and gut can influence each other, and that's how FGIDs develop. The gut microbiota, which is part of the gut-brain axis, is really important in FGIDs. People with Irritable Bowel Syndrome, which is a common FGID, have a different configuration of gut bacteria than healthy people. And taking probiotics and antibiotics can help people with FGIDs feel better in both their gut and their minds, ultimately linking the effects of CNS and ENS through gut brain axis on health of an individual.[30]

A dysfunctional gut brain axis is associated with neurological and psychological conditions like anxiety, depression, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Psychiatric disorders often cause significant cognitive, emotional and behavioral disturbances which carries a substantial disease burden. Among those neurological disorders, anxiety and depression are the most common ones affecting millions of people worldwide. In recent years, the association between the gut brain axis and psychiatric disorders has garnered much attention and thus now views as an important mechanism in the regulation of mental health and conditions.[31] Gut dysbiosis has been linked to Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, multiple sclerosis, neurodevelopment, and neuropsychiatric conditions, thus possibly suggesting future therapeutic options in the treatment of such conditions by the alterations such as regulations in the gut microbiota.[32]

The gut-brain axis plays an essential role in multiple aspects of physiology including regulating feeding and appetite, glucose homeostasis, and gut motility. Any type of deregulations or communication problems in this axis results in a wide range of physiological disorders. And thus, this physiological axis has been used in a variety of ways to discover therapeutics for many diseases, including type 2 diabetes mellitus, obesity, and functional disorders of the gastrointestinal system. The gut-brain axis helps us feel full and keeps our blood sugar in check. This axis is also involved in how well certain medicines work for treating type- 2 diabetes and obesity.[33]

Table 1. The key mechanisms in different diseases of GBA

Disease Category	Specific Disease	Gut-Brain Axis Involvement	Key Mechanisms
Neurological Disorders	Parkinson's Disease	Gut dysbiosis, altered gut permeability	Alpha-synuclein aggregation, inflammation, vagal nerve involvement
Neurological Disorders	Alzheimer's Disease	Microbiome changes, inflammation	Amyloid-beta and tau protein influence, inflammatory cytokine production
Neurological Disorders	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Gut microbiome alterations, leaky gut	Neurotransmitter imbalances, immune system dysregulation
Neurological Disorders	Multiple Sclerosis (MS)	Gut dysbiosis, altered gut permeability	immune system modulation, inflammatory response.
Mental Health Disorders	Depression	Microbiome imbalances, inflammation	Neurotransmitter regulation (serotonin, GABA), HPA axis dysregulation
Mental Health Disorders	Anxiety Disorders	Gut microbiome changes, HPA axis activity	Inflammatory pathways, neurotransmitter influences
Gastrointestinal Disorders	Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) (Crohn's Disease, Ulcerative Colitis)	Severe gut dysbiosis, impaired gut barrier function	Immune system activation, inflammatory cytokine release
Gastrointestinal Disorders	Irritable Bowel Syndrome(IBS)	Microbiome variations, altered gut motility	Visceral hypersensitivity, neurotransmitter signaling
Metabolic Disorders	Obesity	Gutmicrobiome variations, changes in short chain fatty acids production.	Influences on metabolic signaling, and inflammation.

THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS: Probiotics, Prebiotics, Diet and Nutrition

Prebiotics are foods that act as food for human micro-flora; Prebiotics are used with the intention of improving the balance of these microorganisms. Probiotics are live microorganism, primarily bacteria and yeasts that confer health benefits when consumed in inadequate amounts. These are obtained in foods such as yogurt and sauerkraut; prebiotics are in foods such as whole grains, bananas, greens, onions, garlic's, soybeans' and artichokes. The two most prominent genera of probiotics are *lactobacillus* and *bifidobacterium*, with strains such as *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium* bifidum being widely recognized for their specific health benefits. In addition, probiotics and prebiotics are added to some foods and available as dietary supplements. Potential therapies of this nature encompass the utilization of probiotics and prebiotics, which function by enhancing the quantity and/or activity of beneficial bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, as well as fecal transplantation, which aim to introduce a healthy and diverse microbiota by substituting the current microbiota.[34] This matter is of considerable importance, as the cultivation of intestinal microbiota has largely been overlooked in the development of rapid DNA-based methodologies.[35] Probiotics have the ability to engage with the epithelial cells and various other cells within the human body via physiochemical, enteroendocrine, and immune signaling, similar to the interactions observed with commensal gut microbiota.[36] Prebiotics serve as growth substrates, such as fructooligosaccharides, galactooligosaccharides, inulin, and resistant starch, which function to enhance the proliferation and activity of bacteria that are naturally occurring in the human colon.[37] Therefore, enhancing our understanding of the bacterial species that are less abundant in diseased conditions compared to healthy states will allow us to selectively target these suppressed bacteria through the use of a prebiotics substrate known to promote their growth and activity.A reduction in the diversity of the host's diet and a lower intake of essential nutrients can consequently diminish the availability of substrates necessary for the growth of specific microbes, potentially leading to intestinal dysbiosis. Various elements can affect the composition of gut microbiota, including health status, mode of delivery, and genetic factors; however, diet is regarded as one of the most significant influences on the human gut microbiota throughout all stages of life.[38] The Mediterranean diet is distinguished by a rich variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, and healthy fats, specifically monounsaturated and n-3 polyunsaturated fats. A variety of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of omega-3 fatty acids, which include α-linolenic acid (ALA), eicosapentanoic acid (EPA), and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and omega-6 fatty acids (n-6 PUFAs), which include linoleic and arachidonic acids in treating affective disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, Alzheimer's disease, and in preventing psychosis.[39]

MIND GUT THERAPY

The connection between the mind and the gut plays crucial role in GI disorders as well as in mental conditions. Recent studies have demonstrated that psychological approaches can positively affect gut health. Mind gut therapies work by decreasing stress, modulating ANS and strengthening gut microbiota. For example, Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been found to be highly effective in irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). In a comprehensive meta-analysis it has observed that CBT significantly reduces abdominal pain and symptom severity in IBS patients compared to standard medical treatments.[40] Similarly, medical hypnotherapy is another promising therapy that used the techniques like guided relaxation and suggestion to regulate functions of gut.[41] Likewise, mindfulness-based therapies like Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness Based Stress reduction (MBSR) regulate stress related gut dysfunction by regulating HPA and improving vagal tone.[42] While current researches have shown that Mind-Gut therapy has great potential to treat the issues related to GBA, more large-scale clinical studies are required to establish a concrete relationship.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES FOR STUDY

The investigation of the gut-brain axis is progressing swiftly, driven by a surge of cutting-edge technologies. Developments in next-generation sequencing technologies facilitate a more profound and thorough examination of the gut microbiome, uncovering the intricate composition and functional capabilities of microbial communities. Researchers are also creating advanced culturing techniques to cultivate and analyze previously unculturable gut bacteria, thereby enhancing our understanding of microbial diversity and functionality.[43] By using functional magnetic resonance imaging, researchers may see how the brain reacts to stimuli in the stomach, providing important information about the Gut-Brain communication.[44] Through recoding electrical activity in the brain, electroencephalography makes it possible to investigate the ways in which gut microbes affect cognitive processes and brain function.[45] Furthermore, research is being conducted to clarify the mechanisms underlying vagus nerve stimulation in the GBA, with the goal of evaluating it as a possible therapeutic strategy for a range of neurological and psychiatric disorders. In order to manage the vast amounts of data generated by microbiome and neuroimaging investigation and to build computational models of the GBA, bioinformatics and computational modeling techniques are essential.[46] These developments are enabling scientists to delve deeper into the complexities of the GBA, creating opportunities for innovative approaches to diagnosis and treatment for a wide range of medical conditions.

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Further clarification is needed regarding the specific neural circuits and neurotransmitters that facilitate signal transmission between the gut and the brain. Additionally, the involvement of particular immune molecules, including cytokines and chemokines, in gut-brain communication and their effects on brain function warrant more thorough investigation. There are still many unknowns surrounding the complex interaction between immune responses, gut microbiota, and blood-brain barrier permeability. Furthermore, more research is required to determine how metabolic dysregulation affects gut-brain communication and how it relates to neurological illnesses. Individual difference in gut microbiota composition is caused by a variety of factors, including environmental factors, food and genetics. Research into the GBA and how it affects the development and course of neurological conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease is still underway. In conclusion even though the GBA is a promising field of study, more thorough investigation is necessary to clarify the intricate processes at work and to successfully use this understanding in clinical settings.

CONCLUSION

The role of lifestyle choices is vital in establishing a healthy and diverse microbiota profile, as there is a close relationship between microbiota and brain function. High-sugar and high-fat diets can upset the equilibrium of gut microbiota, leading to determental effects on booth gut and brain health by altering neurotransmitter metabolism, among other issues. To conclude, the sophisticated relationship among gut peptides, modified communication between the gut and brain , cognative and psychological factors, disease symptoms, and inflamation may play a crucial role in shaping eating behaviors in cases of intestinal inflamation. Therapeutic interventions that target psychological, cognitive, and behaioral components may be effective in alleviating disease-related symptoms, including low mood, chronic fatigue, abdominal discomfort, excessive self-monitoring, and impulsivity, which can all detrimentally influence eating patterns. The conditions explored in this review are complex, with disruption in the GBA being a significant contributing factor.

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