

Gut Feelings: Fact of Fiction?

Peter Holzer

Research Unit of Translational Neurogastroenterology, Institute of Experimental and Clinical Pharmacology, Medical University of Graz, Graz, Austria

The phrase “gut feelings” is widely used in everyday language and has a number of connotations ranging from intuition, instinctive feeling, taking decisions without rational underpinnings to serendipity. While in a psychosomatic context the gastrointestinal tract has long been known to respond to emotions and stress, it has remained elusive how the gut itself could be a source of feelings/emotions. Neurobiological research in the past two decades has revealed that there is a continuous flow of information from the digestive tract and other internal organs to the brain. In health, this information does not reach the level of consciousness but is important for the autonomic control of body functions. Brain imaging techniques have in addition revealed that part of the subconscious information flow from internal organs is also fed into the corticolimbic system where it is very likely to influence thinking, emotions and mood. This process is embodied in the term “interoception”, and it is emerging that - via the process of interoception - signals from the gut and other internal organs exert an influence on our “feelings” (emotion, cognition and mood) and that a disturbance of interoception has an impact on neuropsychiatric disease.