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Microbiome and substances of abuse

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# Microbiome and substances of abuse Salavrakos, M., Leclercq S., De Timary, P., Dom, G.

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5 Special Issue The role of gut microbiota in the pathogenesis, diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric diseases

#### Abstract

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There is a growing amount of evidence showing a reciprocal relation between the gut microbiota and the brain. Substance use disorders (SUD), which are a major cause of preventable morbidity and mortality worldwide, have an influence on the gut microbiota and on the brain-gut axis. The communication between the microbiota and the brain exists through different pathways: (1) the immune response elicited by bacterial products, coupled with alterations of the intestinal barrier allowing these products to enter the bloodstream, (2) the direct and indirect effects of bacterial metabolites such as short chain fatty acids (SCFAs) or tryptophan on the brain, (3) and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, whose peripheral afferents can be influenced by the microbiota, and can in turn activate microglia. Among substances of abuse, alcohol has been the subject of the greatest number of studies in this field. In some but not all patients suffering from alcohol-use-disorder (AUD), alcohol alters the composition of the gut microbiota and the permeability of the intestinal barrier, directly and through dysbiosis. It has also been well demonstrated that alcohol induces a peripheral inflammation; it is still unclear whether it induces a central inflammation, as there are contradictory results in human studies. In animal studies, it has been shown that neuroinflammation increases during alcohol withdrawal. Literature on opioids and stimulants is less numerous. Chronic morphine intake induces dysbiosis, increased intestinal permeability and a probable neuroinflammation, which could explain symptoms such as tolerance, hyperalgesia and deficit in reward behaviour. Cocaine induces a dysbiosis and conversely the microbiome can modulate the behavioral response to stimulant drugs. Tobacco cessation is associated with an increase in microbiota diversity.

Taken together, the findings of our literature review suggest a bidirectional influence in the pathogenesis of substance use disorders.

# Keywords

5 Substances of abuse, alcohol-use-disorder, opioids, stimulants, gut microbiota, gutbrain axis, intestinal permeability, inflammation

#### **1. Introduction**

Substance use disorders (SUD) are increasingly recognized as one of the primary drivers of preventable morbidity and mortality. Globally in 2016, 99.2 million disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) and 4.2% of all DALYs were attributable to

alcohol use, and 31.8 million DALYs and 1.3% of all DALYs were attributable to drug use as a risk factor<sup>1</sup>. The attributable DALYs for tobacco smoking have been estimated to be 170.9 million in 2015<sup>2</sup>. In spite of this formidable impact, treatment interventions currently only have a weak to moderate effect, highlighting the need to deepen our understanding of underlying pathogenetic processes and explore new targets for treatment interventions<sup>3</sup>.

Last decade, there has been a growing interest for the gut-brain axis and its role in a bidirectional biochemical and neural signaling between the gastrointestinal tract and the brain. Specifically the gut microbiota is able to modulate this signaling both directly and indirectly via endocrine, neural and immune pathways<sup>4</sup>. In disease and stress states,

15 these pathways may become compromised, resulting in dysbiosis, changes in mood, behavior, cognition and altered inflammatory levels<sup>4</sup>. As such, gut microbiota have been suggested to play an important role within the pathogenic processes underlying a broad variety of psychiatric disorders<sup>5</sup>.

Although most of the research on the relation between microbiota and mental health 20 has been done in the fields of depression and stress-related disorders, recently there is an increase in exploring the relevance within substance use disorders <sup>6,7,8.</sup> This review focuses on the relation between the microbiota and the use of substances

of abuse; i.e. alcohol, heroine, stimulants (cocaine, amphetamines), and nicotine. We build and expand upon a recent review on this topic in this journal by Hillmacher and colleagues, i.e. alcohol, microbiota and effect on psychiatric disorders, by adding the latest research on alcohol and expanding to other substances of abuse<sup>9</sup> (Table 1, 2,3).

#### 2. Microbioma and brain-gut axis: general mechanisms

- 5 The human gut microbiota has recently been the subject of extended studies establishing its impact on the immune system<sup>10–12</sup> and metabolism<sup>13,14</sup> of the human host. The microbiota is the ensemble of microorganisms (bacteria, viruses, fungi and yeasts) that reside in the human gastrointestinal tract. The number of bacterial species in an individual's gut is estimated between a few hundreds<sup>15</sup> and a thousand<sup>16</sup> different
- 10 identified species. The differing from the microbiota, the microbiome is defined as the total genetic material of the bacteria in this ecosystem<sup>17</sup>. Its composition is unique to each individual and is influenced by factors such as genetics, mode of delivery at birth<sup>18</sup>, race, diet, living in an urban or rural environment<sup>19</sup> or the use of antibiotics<sup>20,21</sup>. It is difficult to establish what a normal and an abnormal microbiota is. The majority of
- 15 the bacteria present in adults are members of the *Firmicutes* and *Bacteroidetes* phyla<sup>22</sup>, but their relative proportions and the species present vary significantly between individuals<sup>23</sup>. Alterations in the composition of the gut microbiota relate to several psychiatric disorders, such as depression<sup>24</sup>, anxiety<sup>25</sup>, autism<sup>26,27</sup> and schizophrenia<sup>28</sup>.

Several channels do exist through which the gut, in particular the gut microbiome, and

20 the brain communicate and influence each other. The understanding of the complexity of the gut-brain axis is essential to capture how gut microbiota dysregulation could influence the development of behavioral manifestations, addictive behaviors and addictions. Among the different gut-brain axis channels that have been described, the most recognized pathways are: (1) the immune response<sup>29–33</sup>, (2) the metabolic pathway<sup>34–39</sup>, (3) the neuroendocrine pathway and the vagus nerve<sup>40–45</sup>. We will

describe these three pathways of influence and then describe the behavioral evidence supporting their existence, before moving on to the effects of different substances of abuse on the gut-brain axis.

#### 5 **2.1. The immune response**

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The first communication pathway between the microbiota and the brain is through the immune response elicited by bacterial products present in the gut lumen and passing into the systemic circulation. The intestinal wall, composed of a mucus layer, a monolayer of epithelial cells connected by junctional complexes, and mucosal immune cells acts as a physical and immune barrier, limiting the amount of gut antigens interacting with the immune system. Bacterial antigens such as lipopolysaccharides (LPS) or peptidoglycans (PGN) interact with receptors on lymphocytes and monocytes but also on other immune cells of the body to elicit an inflammatory response and induce a low grade inflammation<sup>46</sup>. The composition of the gut microbiota influences intestinal barrier function, with bacterias such as *E.Coli* or *Clostridium difficile* increasing intestinal permeability<sup>29</sup>, while other species, such as *Bifidobacterium*<sup>30</sup> and *Butyricicoccus pullicaecorum*<sup>31</sup>, reinforce the intestinal mucosae in animal models. Endotoxin and inflammatory mediators can then pass an intact blood-brain barrier (BBB) through an active transport<sup>47,48</sup> but the microbiota also affects BBB permeability, facilitating inflammatory mediators entry in the brain<sup>32</sup>, and hence

20 permeability, facilitating inflammatory mediators entry in the brain<sup>32</sup>, and hence activating the microglia.

Microglial cells are the phagocytes of the brain. They are activated through direct contact with cytokines present in the interstitial environment such as colony-stimuling factors (CSF)<sup>49</sup> or through receptor-ligand interactions with cells in their immediate environment<sup>50</sup>: in vivo studies have shown that adenosine triphosphate (ATP) for

instance is released during high neuronal activity to promote surveillance by microglial processes<sup>51,52</sup>; a disruption of the BBB can also expose microglial cells to proteins such as fibrinogen and engage CD11b/CD18 integrin heterodimers and an intracellular activation pathway<sup>8</sup>.

- 5 Microglia express and secrete immune-related signaling molecules that alter synaptic transmission and plasticity in the absence of inflammation; when inflammation appears, microglia modify synaptic connection and plasticity<sup>53</sup>. Research shows that synaptic strength and behavior can arise from immune-related signaling governed by the microglia. Application of chemokine CX<sub>3</sub>CL1 to stimulate microglia in brain slices causes a depression in synaptic transmission, that was not observed for mice deficient
- 10 causes a depression in synaptic transmission, that was not observed for mice deficient in microglial receptor to CX<sub>3</sub>CL1<sup>54</sup>. The cytokine TNFα released by microglial cells interacts with neurons and can modify synaptic stength<sup>55</sup> or induce cell death<sup>56</sup>. Microglia can thus eliminate entire cells or structures, especially synapses, which explains why they play a crucial role in brain development<sup>53</sup>. Another preclinical study
- shows a role of microglial brain neurotrophic factor (BDNF) in maintaining expression of postsynaptic glutamate receptor subtypes, a key player in synaptic plasticity<sup>57</sup>. Microglia also use cytokines and chemokines to recruit local immune cells and monocytes from the periphery to the brain<sup>58</sup>.

In vivo studies have shown a direct correlation between microbiota composition and 20 microglia function and maturation<sup>33</sup>. Type I interferon is produced in the CNS in combination with metabolites derived from dietary tryptophan, originated from the gut, to active astrocytes and regulate central inflammation<sup>59</sup>. Elevation of LPS serum levels, which is known to correlate with modifications of microbiota, produced a microglial activation observable on PET-CT in non-human primates<sup>60</sup>. Moreover, these are 25 correlated with behavioral symptoms. In rodents, sensitization of microglia and monocyte trafficking to the brain are regulators of recurring anxiety following exposure to prolonged stress<sup>61</sup>. In humans, peripheric and central inflammation have been linked to psychological symptoms<sup>62</sup>,<sup>63</sup>.

#### 5 **2.2. The metabolic pathways**

Bacterial metabolites, such as short chain fatty acids (SCFAs), may also allow the communication between the gut and the brain. SCFAs are products of anaerobic fermentation in the large intestine, that activate G protein-coupled receptors, expressed in different locations, on enteroendocrine cells, adipocytes, immune cells and

neurons<sup>64</sup>. A specific role for SCFAs, and in particular butyrate, as promoters of the intestinal barrier integrity has recently been demonstrated in preclinical models<sup>35,65,66</sup>: butyrate induces cell proliferation, mucin production and has an anti-inflammatory activity on intestinal immune cells. At a central level, SCFAs have an ability to diffuse across the BBB<sup>67</sup> and influence brain function and behavior: butyrate reduces
neuroinflammation through an action on microglial receptors<sup>36</sup>; acetate modulates the appetite by binding to hippocampus<sup>68</sup>; in mice, SCFAs administration reduces symptoms of depression<sup>69</sup>. In keeping with these observations SCFAs depletion was observed in MDD patients<sup>70-72</sup>.

The microbiota also plays a role in the synthesis of tryptophan, the precursor of serotonin<sup>37,38,73</sup>, and of several neuromediators such as gamma-aminobutyric acid, norepinephrine, dopamine and serotonin<sup>39</sup>, as demonstrated in animal models. Most of these microbiota-generated neurotransmitters do not cross the BBB but act locally on the enteric nervous system. Conversely, tryptophan crosses the BBB and is available at the brain level as a source for serotonin synthesis<sup>74</sup>. Under conditions of inflammation, tryptophan can also be diverted from the serotonin production into the kynurenin

pathway<sup>75–77</sup>, thus reducing the levels of serotonin and inducing depression-like behaviour<sup>78</sup> through the production of neuroactive metabolites. Studies have linked modifications of the microbiota, through the use of antibiotics or probiotic supplementation, to modifications in the kynurenin/tryptophan ratio, and improvement

5 of anxious and depressive symptoms in both animal and human models $^{79-81}$ .

#### 2.3. The neuroendocrine pathway and the vagus nerve

Mice and human studies have shown that psychological stresses such as social disruption<sup>82</sup>, maternal separation<sup>83</sup> or military service<sup>84</sup> are associated with changes in gut microbiota and gut permeability. Germ-free (GF) mice (mice that have always lived in a sterile environment and are free of any bacteria invasion) show an exaggerated HPA reactivity, with elevated ACTH and corticosterone levels after a mild stress<sup>40</sup>. A recent unpublished study<sup>85</sup> suggests a link between microbiota composition and cortisol blood levels in both humans and animals. Microglial cells, whose maturation and activate the HPA axis<sup>41</sup>. Conversely, direct HPA activation, through afferents of the vagus nerve, induces glucocorticoids production, whose receptors are highly expressed on microglial cells<sup>86</sup>, and activate brain microglia<sup>87</sup>. The HPA axis, the stress response and the neuroinflammatory response are largely intertwined.

20 The vagus nerve is also related to gut microbiota regulation<sup>42</sup>. Parasympathetic sensory afferents and efferents of the vagus nerve exist within the digestive tract<sup>88</sup>. Several works have shown an effect of microbiota on vagal gut afferents. GF mice present with emotional regulation capacities that differ from control mice and, in particular, show fewer signs of anxiety; ingestion by these mice of a strain of *Lactobacillus* induces region-dependent alterations in the expression of central GABA receptor and reduces

anxiety-like and depression-like behavior, and this effect is lost in vagotomised mice<sup>43</sup>. Several bacterial species may increase firing rate in vagal afferents<sup>44-45</sup>. Although not in direct contact with the gut lumen, as they do not cross the epithelial layer<sup>89</sup>, vagal afferents may detect bacterial products that diffuse through the epithelial wall through

5 an interaction possibly mediated by entero-endocrine cells<sup>90</sup>, that express receptors which recognize bacterial products such as LPS<sup>91</sup> and SCFAs<sup>92</sup>. Furthermore, vagal sensory gut neurons are connected to brain reward neurons, inducing the release of dopamine and sustained self-stimulation<sup>93</sup>.

Conversely, the vagus nerve may affect the composition of the gut microbiota through
 still poorly explored mechanisms: the vagus nerve has anti-inflammatory effects on the
 digestive tract; acetylcholine, the principal vagal neurotransmitter, inhibits the release
 of TNFα in LPS stimulated human macrophage<sup>94</sup>, reducing local inflammation; vagal
 nerve stimulation also attenuates disruptions of epithelial tight junctions in
 endotoxemic mice<sup>95</sup>, thus decreasing intestinal permeability. It can be hypothesized that
 the effects of the vagus nerve on local inflammation and gut permeability influence gut

#### 2.4. Behavioral expressions of the gut-brain axis

Studies on GF mice have allowed to measure the impact of an absence of microbiome
on the central nervous system, independently of the different pathways of influence.
GF mice have demonstrated the importance of the microbiome in several brain developmental processes, such as myelination<sup>96</sup>, synaptic development<sup>97</sup>, dendritic morphology<sup>98</sup> and maturation of the hippocampal serotoninergic system<sup>99</sup>. On a behavioral level, GF mice show deficits in social cognitions<sup>100</sup> and increased anxietylike behaviors<sup>101</sup>. A 24h-exposure to an environment outside a sterile isolator makes

GF mice less anxious<sup>102</sup>. Transplantation of fecal microbiota derived from patients with MDD in GF mice causes depression-like behavior, whereas transplantation from healthy subjects has no effect on their behavior<sup>71</sup>. The microbiota appears to also play a role in autistic behavior. A transplantation of gut microbiota from humans with suffering ASD into GF mice induces hallmark autistic behavior<sup>103</sup>.

#### Insert Tables 1, 2 & 3 about here

#### 3. Alcohol

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#### 10 **3.1. Intestinal dysbiosis and increased gut permeability**

Given the impact of diet on the gut microbiome, it is not surprising that alcohol affects the composition of our intestinal flora. However, as most studies to date that show the existence of gut dysbiosis in AUD patients are cross-sectional, it is not totally clear whether the dysbiosis is due to the alcohol consumption or whether is precedes the

- 15 development of AUD and hence plays a role in its development. A seminal study dating from 1984<sup>104</sup> already showed an overgrowth of Gram-negative anaerobic bacteria in the jejunum of patients with AUD, and related it to the functional intestinal symptoms often observed in alcoholic patients. A more recent analysis of colonic biopsy samples revealed a higher rate of *Proteobacteria* and a lower rate of *Bacteroidetes* in alcoholic
- 20 subjects compared to controls<sup>105</sup>. In a subset of patients, the altered microbiota composition correlated with high levels of serum endotoxin. The alterations of the microbiota in AUD patients appear to be long-lasting, as these alterations of the microbiota are also observed in AUD patients who had been sober for more than one month<sup>105</sup>. Another study<sup>106</sup> showed an increase in *Proteobacteria*, *Sutterella*,
- 25 Holdemania and Clostridium families and a large decrease in Faecalibacterium in

patients that did not present with major liver alterations. Examining cirrhotic patients, a study<sup>107</sup> points an increase in potentially dangerous bacteria from the families Prevotellaceae, Enterobacteriaceae, Veillonellaceae, and Streptococcaceae in subjects with alcoholic cirrhosis, compared to subjects with hepatitis B cirrhosis and to control subjects. Species-level compositions appear to be different in AUD patients with and 5 without cirrhosis<sup>108</sup>. A 2019 systematic review on microbiota composition in AUD<sup>109</sup> states a general increase in endotoxin-producing and decrease in autochtonous bacterial taxa. Several hypotheses have been proposed regarding the mechanism by which alcohol affects the microbiome: probably a combination of an increase of fecal pH<sup>110</sup>, a decrease of bile secretions<sup>111</sup> and modifications of gastric acidity and gut motility<sup>112</sup>. 10 A recent clinical study<sup>113</sup> shows that alcohol decreases SCFAs levels, which play a major role in the homeostasis of the gastrointestinal wall. In vitro studies<sup>34</sup> have shown that ethanol, at concentrations found in the body after moderate drinking, along with its metabolite acetaldehyde, disrupt intestinal tight junctions and increase intestinal 15 permeability. In addition to altering the composition of the gut microbiota intestinal flora, alcohol appears to have direct effects on the components of the intestinal barrier. How long this increased intestinal permeability persists is unclear, as it was still present after two weeks of abstinence in one clinical study<sup>114</sup>, and completely recovered after three weeks in another<sup>115</sup>. Alcohol also has a negative effect on mucus and antimicrobial peptide production<sup>116</sup>. Overall, AUD patients show an increased intestinal 20 permeability to several polysaccharides such as lactulose and mannitol<sup>117,118</sup>. However, as proposed above, some changes in the composition of the gut microbiota may also precede the development of AUD and exposure to massive ethanol drinking. Exposure of adolescent rats to ethanol binge intoxication does induce changes in the composition

of the gut microbiota, but that are not as important as that observed in AUD populations<sup>119</sup>.

In keeping with these observations, a study<sup>120</sup> focusing on dysbiosis and intestinal permeability found that only a subgroup of AUD patients with altered intestinal permeability show a dysbiosis compared to the control group, which was characterized by a general decrease in the abundance of the overall bacterial load, a decrease in the abundance of the *Ruminococcaceae* family, and an increase of *Lachnospiraceae* family. The total amount of bacteria and the amounts *Bifidobacterium* and *Fecalibacterium prausnitzii* species abundance are negatively correlated with intestinal permeability, suggesting that these bacteria reinforce the integrity of the intestinal wall<sup>121</sup>. The observation of a group of AUD patients that do not present with a dysbiosis also means that ethanol consumption is not sufficient to induce changes in the composition of the gut microbiota, suggesting there are other factors involved, possibly even anterior to the beginning of alcohol consumption, and that dysbiosis is not necessarily present in

15 the disorder.

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#### 3.2. Pro-inflammatory mediators and neuroinflammation

Excessive alcohol intake induces a peripheric inflammatory response which plays an important role in the development of alcoholic liver disease<sup>122</sup>. It appears now that at

least part of this inflammatory response is due to the gut microbiota and could also lead through the gut-brain axis to an inflammatory response in the central nervous system. Gram-negative bacteria such as *Proteobacteria* that are found in abundance in the microbiota of AUD patients account for an important source of LPS that can cross an altered intestinal wall<sup>123</sup>. Studies have found an elevated level of LPS in the blood of AUD patients<sup>115</sup> and in healthy subjects after binge drinking<sup>124</sup>. In rats, alcohol-induced

dysbiosis contributes to endotoxemia by favoring the growth of Gram-negative bacteria, thus increasing the production of endotoxins, and by disrupting the intestinal barrier, thus allowing endotoxins to enter the bloodstream<sup>125</sup>. Through activation of Toll-like (TL) 4 receptors, LPS can activate the HPA axis and an inflammatory reaction in several tissues such as the liver and the brain<sup>126</sup>. In the liver, Kupffer cells, the 5 resident macrophages, are activated by LPS and produce pro-inflammatory chemokines, reactive oxygen species and leukotrienes<sup>127</sup>, which can lead to liver injury. There is a strong correlation between endotoxin blood levels in both rats<sup>128</sup> and humans<sup>129</sup> and the severity of liver damage. Other bacterial components such as PGN 10 can also cross the gut barrier and elicit an inflammatory reaction through activation of TL2 receptors<sup>130</sup>. We have described before how peripheric inflammatory mediators can then reach the brain. Animal studies have shown that alcohol intoxication induces an inflammatory response in the brain, with alterations in the expression of several cytokines in different parts of the brain<sup>131,132</sup>. Enhanced expression of TL receptors in 15 brains, particularly those on microglia, were found in rats after adolescent binge drinking<sup>133</sup> and in AUD patients<sup>134</sup>. In human post-mortem brains, increased levels of MCP-1 and increased microglial markers are found in heavy drinkers<sup>135</sup>. It is important to note that part of this neuroinflammation could be related to a direct effect of ethanol on the brain<sup>136–138</sup>. Other potent sources of inflammation including the gut itself, the liver or the adipose tissue have also been suggested<sup>139</sup>. However, even though the 20 importance of inflammation in animal models of alcohol addiction has been largely demonstrated, in humans, except in postmortem studies, direct evidence for the existence of a neuroinflammation in AUD patients is still lacking. Peripheral inflammation has been well described, but the few PET-CT studies that have been performed using TSPO ligand that is expected to measure the microglial activation<sup>140–</sup> 25

<sup>142</sup>, showed controversial results with lower or equal levels of neuroinflammation compared to controls. This is clearly a shadow to the neuroinflammatory theory of addiction. It is more cautious for now to talk of 'neuromodulation' of the microglial system in AUD than of 'neuroinflammation'.

- 5 Alcohol-induced neuromodulation could have many repercussions. There is a growing amount of evidence linking depressive behaviour<sup>143–145</sup> and anxiogenic-related behaviour<sup>146</sup> to a low-grade inflammatory response and an activation of cell-mediated immunity in both animal and human models. Furthermore, several animal studies show that an induced neuroinflammation could promote alcohol-seeking behaviour<sup>147,148</sup>.
- 10 Several genes involved in immunity are overexpressed in strains of mice breeded for alcohol-preference (independently of ethanol administration)<sup>149,150</sup>, and there is an important overlap in the brain of mice between genes activated by LPS and by ethanol<sup>151</sup>. Further supporting the role of inflammation, genetic deletion of inflammatory genes in mice was associated with a decrease in alcohol preference and
- 15 consumption<sup>152</sup>. In humans, the improvement of obsessional craving scores during short-term withdrawal correlated with a decrease in the expression of IL-1b and IL-8 in peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs)<sup>130</sup>. Altogether, these data support that neuroinflammation plays a role in behavioral symptoms related to addiction in AUD.

### 20 **3.3. Alcohol withdrawal**

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Alcohol withdrawal appears to be a period of time when neuroinflammation is enhanced. In rats, there is an acute expression of proinflammatory mediators, both at the mRNA and the protein level, after 48h of abstinence<sup>153</sup>. A study<sup>154</sup> shows that in mice drinking alcohol for 5 months and then being abstinent for 15 days, the activation of microglial and astroglial cells in the striatum and prefrontal cortex is maintained, and associated with anxiety-related behaviour and cognitive impairments. Mice lacking TL4 receptors were protected against these effects. Patients undergoing alcohol withdrawal experience a number of emotional disturbances<sup>155</sup>, which have been linked to a neuroinflammatory response in the central nucleus of the amygdala, a structure associated with the regulation of emotions<sup>153,156</sup>. Leclercq et al.<sup>115</sup> found that at the beginning of alcohol withdrawal, plasma proinflammatory cytokines of AUD patients positively correlate with scores of depression, anxiety and alcohol craving. In a later study<sup>120</sup> the same research group found that a subgroup of AUD subjects who develop gut leakiness and dysbiosis have higher scores of depression, anxiety and craving after three weeks of abstinence than AUD subjects with normal intestinal permeability. This suggests a circular relationship between alcohol intake, inflammation and craving in a

subgroup but not in all AUD patients. It offers new perspectives on pharmacological targets for dysbiotic patients.

#### 15 **4. Illicit drugs: opiates and stimulants.**

#### 4.1. Opiates

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In many countries, prescription opioids are used exponentially in the management of pain. However, concerns are rising concerning the substantial risks on diversion, misuse, addiction and overdose deaths, as demonstrated in the US opioid epidemic <sup>157</sup>.

In addition, recent clinical evidence suggests that opioid use might be impairing somatic recovery as a result of their interactions with inflammatory processes<sup>158</sup>. However, the relationship between opioid use and immune responses seem to be complex and not consistent<sup>159</sup>. On the one hand, human studies indicate (peripherical) immunosuppressive effects of opioids, albeit not for all types of opioids<sup>158,159</sup>. In
 contrast, preclinical studies suggest CNS pro-inflammatory cytokine upregulation and

neuroinflammation, after acute and chronic opioid exposure, might be a contributing factor to the development of symptoms associated with chronic opioid use, i.e. tolerance, dependence and reward<sup>158,160,161</sup>. Interestingly, within this context, ibudilast, a glial nonselective phosphodiesterase inhibitor, attenuates subjective morphine withdrawal and motivation for low-dose oxycodone in a progressive ratio task with heroin dependent patients<sup>158,162,163</sup>.

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As opioid receptors are highly expressed within the digestive tract and opioids influence gut motility, it might be expected that systemic opioid treatment will impact the composition of the gut microbiota. Indeed, alterations in GI microbiome have been documented in human and animal opioid users. Of all opiates, morphine has been studied most with respect to the relation with the gut-brain axis<sup>8</sup>. Preclinical studies show that both acute and long-term treatment with morphine induces disturbances in the composition of gut microbiota, i.e. decreases in *Bacteroidetes* and *Firmicutes* and increases in *Proteobacteria*<sup>164,165</sup>. Interestingly, morphine induced dysbiosis is

15 antagonized by naltrexone, indicating the specificity of this action through the opioid receptors<sup>8</sup>.

In animal models, chronic morphine administration induces changes in the intestinal epithelium increasing permeability and bacterial translocation mediated by Toll-like receptor (TLR)<sup>166,167</sup>. These mechanisms may underly a causal pathway linking chronic morphine administration associated gut dysbiosis with neuroinflammation, hyperalgesia, deficits in reward behavior and microglial activation<sup>168,169</sup>. Of interest, pre-treatment with a probiotic Lactobacillus acidophilus in a rat model was associated with increased pain threshold, improved hypersensitivity and expression of MOR<sup>170</sup>.

Taken together findings from preclinical studies suggest an association between chronic

25 (and acute) opioid intake, gut dysbiosis and subsequentially development of tolerance,

hyperalgesia and changes in reward behavior, all of which may play a role in developing opioid use disorders. However, up to now, very few clinical studies have been done confirming these findings within human studies, leaving this field open for future explorations.

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# 4.2. Stimulants

Although disorders in the use of stimulants such as cocaine and amphetamines are worldwide increasing and having a major public health impact, research on the relation between stimulant use and gut microbiome is scarce. Preclinical studies show that

- 10 cocaine administration depletes the *Mucispirillum*, *Ruminococcaceae*, *Lachnospiracea*, *Pseudoflavonifractor* and *Butryccicoccus* bacteria in the rodent gut<sup>171,172</sup>. These are all producers of short-chain fatty Acids (SCFA) and related metabolites and play a critical role in maintaining epithelial and immune homeostasis. In addition, cocaine administration has been associated with inducing inflammatory processes in the gut,
- 15 i.e. increased expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines, chemokines and activation of transcription factors<sup>172</sup>. Taken together, very preliminary, preclinical studies suggest that (chronic) cocaine intake can induce a process of gut-barrier dysregulations, altered gut microbiota colonization and inflammation, that might contribute to behavioral (brain) changes associated with cocaine use<sup>173,174</sup>. Increasingly also human studies
  20 suggest that the gut microbiome can modulate the behavioral response to stimulant drugs and vice versa that (chronic) use of stimulants can change the microbiome<sup>158</sup>. Patients with cocaine use disorder were shown to have, compared with drug free controls, an altered gut microbiome, i.e. increased representation of the *Bacteroidetes* phylum<sup>158,175</sup>. However, given the paucity of studies in humans much caution is warranted in translating the preclinical findings.

#### 5. Tobacco

Smoking changes the microbiome in several regions, i.e. periodontal, gut, and respiratory track<sup>176</sup>, and plays a role in the mechanisms underlying changes in the

- 5 mucosal immune response, fluctuation of intestinal cytokine levels, changes in gut permeability, and epigenetic modifications altering gene expression<sup>177,178</sup>. Consistent with these hypotheses are findings indicating that smoking is associated not only with inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)<sup>177,179</sup> but also periodontitis, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and cancer<sup>177,180</sup>. So, the effects of smoking on the microbiome and subsequent somatic disorders is consistently demonstrated. However,
- the effect of smoking on the gut-brain axis and its behavioral implications largely unexplored. Of interest, while smoking induces changes in the microbiome, i.e. increase of *Firmicutes* and *Actinobacteria* and decrease of *Bacteroidetes* and *Proteobacteria*, smoking cessation induces an increase in microbial diversity in patients<sup>181,182</sup>.

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#### 6. Therapeutic implications

All this evidence suggests that the gut microbiome itself could be a therapeutic target in several substance use disorders, through the use of antibiotics, probiotics, prebiotics or fecal transplantation. In AUD, preclinical studies have shown that treatment with antibiotics reduces Gram-negative bacteria and prevents ALD<sup>183,184</sup>. Antibiotics such as minocyclin and rapamycin, that also present with anti-inflammatory properties, have shown positive neuroprotective effects and decreased alcohol intake in mice<sup>185–188</sup>. However, it is still unclear if this effect is linked to anti-inflammatory properties or changes in the composition of the gut flora, as these dimensions were not controlled for in these studies<sup>189</sup>.

Regarding probiotics, administration of live microorganisms such as *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* and *Bifidobacterium* seem to partially prevent gut leakiness, reduce endotoxin levels and attenuate the HPA response to stress in rodents<sup>128,190,191</sup>. In humans, a 5-day supplementation with *Bifidobacterium bifidum* and *Lactobacillus plantarum* during alcohol detoxification shows a benefit in lowering liver enzymes compared to abstinence alone<sup>192</sup>. A 7-day oral supplementation with *Lactobacillus substilis* and *Streptococcus faecium* was associated with a reduction of LPS levels in patients with alcoholic hepatitis<sup>193</sup>. A 4-week administration of *Lactobacillus casei Shirota* restored neutrophilic phagocytic capacity in patients with alcoholic cirrhosis<sup>194</sup>.

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- In a long term perspective, a 120-day treatment with probiotic VSL#3 reduced oxidative stress and cytokine production, and improved liver function in AUD patients<sup>195</sup>. A functional MRI (fMRI) clinical study shows that a 4-week intake of fermented milk containing probiotic leads to changes of activity in brain regions controlling the central processing of emotions and sensations<sup>196</sup>. A 4-week intake of probiotics helps reduce negative thoughts associated with sad mood<sup>197</sup>. A 8-week intake of *Lactobacillus*
- *acidophilus, Lactobacillus casei* and *Bifidobacterium bifidum* has a beneficial effect on depressive symptoms in patients with MDD<sup>198</sup>.

Prebiotics are defined as non-viable dietary substrates, such as dietary fibers, selectively used by the host microorganisms and conferring a health benefit <sup>199</sup>. Their effect on the

20 gut-brain axis is mediated through the production of specific metabolites such as SCFAs, modification of intestinal pH which inhibits pathogen growth, the reinforcement of the intestinal barrier and the development of anti-inflammatory properties<sup>200</sup>. Prebiotics have been shown to modify the abundance of more than 100 bacterial taxa in both animal and humans<sup>201–203</sup>. Studies on rats show that oats supplementation reduces gut leakiness and prevents alcohol-induced liver damage<sup>204</sup>.

In mice fed with alcohol, administration of fructooligosaccharides restored the levels of antimicrobial peptide Reg $3\gamma$ , reduced bacterial overgrowth and steatohepatitis<sup>116</sup>. Consumption of prebiotics galacto-oligosaccharide or inulin-type fructans by healthy individuals increases the proportion of *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii* and

5 *Bifidobacteria*<sup>203</sup>, both low in AUD patients with dysbiosis<sup>120</sup>, suggesting that that type of intervention might be fruitful in AUD patients, or at least in the subgroup that present with a dysbiosis.

Fecal microbiota transplant is a procedure involving the transfer or intestinal microbiota from one person to another<sup>58</sup>. It has been used as an experimental model to determine

- 10 the causal relationship between gut microbiota and host outcomes, and as a successfull therapeutic one in treatment of refractory *Clostridium difficile* infection<sup>205</sup>. In AUD, fecal microbiota transplantation was performed with feces from alcohol-resistant donor mice to alcohol-sensitive receiver mice; the result showed an intestinal microbiota very similar to that of the donor mice in the receiver mice, and a reduced liver inflammation
- and steatosis<sup>206</sup>. In humans, a trial involving 8 patients with severe alcoholic hepatitis who were administered FMT for a 7-day period found normalised levels of *Proteobacteria* and *Actinobacteria* after the transplant, and an improved survival at one year compared to historical controls<sup>207</sup>. A recent randomized clinical trial comparing patients with severe alcoholic hepatitis receiving FMT versus steroids showed
  promising results, with an improved 90-day survival in patients receiving FMT<sup>208</sup>.
- More preclinical and clinical data are needed to evaluate the benefits of FMT in acute and chronic treatment situations.

#### 7. Discussion

Taken together, our findings fit in an already consistent body of literature revealing a complex, bidirectional role of the microbiome in the pathogenesis of different, often co-morbid, psychiatric disorders. Within these, reward, motivation and stress-related neurobiological processes are implicated. Processes that are also at the core of the pathogenesis of disorders in the use of substances. The findings from our review, provide some evidence that also within SUD, changes in microbiome might have a bidirectional causal involvement. Exposure to alcohol or illicit drugs, induces imbalances in gut microbiota<sup>9,209</sup>. The resulting dysbiosis correlates with altered stress and reward related processing, based upon different mechanisms, i.e. direct (vagal) or indirect via microbial metabolites (SCFAs, neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine), or immune pathways (inflammation). Changes in reward and stress processing, in turn, can change behavioral responses to alcohol and drug rewards, initiating or continuing a vulnerability for substance use disorders. Although this line of thinking is far too simplistic and many elements are still unknown, the findings in our literature review provide some indications, most outspoken with regard to alcohol, in support of these bi-directional pathways in the pathogenesis of substance use disorders.

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Different limitations need to be taken into account within the current context. First, we did not include all substances of abuse in this review, neither did we include nonchemical addictions (behavioral, e.g. gambling). We limited ourselves to those substances that account for the greatest levels of morbidity and mortality, i.e. alcohol, cigarette smoking, opiates and stimulants. The findings in this review cannot, without future research, be translated uncritically to other substances of abuse. Another major caveat within many human studies is that most patients included used more than one
substance, frequently combining different drugs, smoking and alcohol use<sup>181</sup>. This

makes it extremely difficult to draw strict substance specific conclusions. This might be specifically true for cannabis dependence, where interreference with tobacco smoking is highly frequent. Also, studies on cannabis use and the microbiome remain extremely scarce at this moment.

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Although the clinical studies included in this review suggest a relation between dysbiosis and SUD, these findings might be confounded by co-morbidity with depression and other stress-related disorders, who themselves have been associated with gut dysbiosis. Indeed, inflammation driven hypo-dopaminergia might be a 10 common factor underlying the (frequent) co-morbidity between SUD, anhedonia and mood/stress disorders<sup>168,210,211</sup>. None of the included studies in this review controlled for comorbidities, warranting caution in the interpretation of these results. There are similarities with the microbiota changes induced by MDD and SUD such as an increase in Proteobacteria<sup>70</sup>, that was found in MDD but also in abuse of alcohol<sup>105,106</sup> and 15 morphine<sup>164,165</sup>. However, there are also discrepancies such as an increase in Bacteroidetes in MDD<sup>196</sup>, which are found less abundantly in AUD<sup>105</sup> and morphine abuse<sup>164,165</sup>, but more abundantly in cocaine abuse<sup>158,175</sup>. Regarding anxiety, most of the evidence is still preclinical<sup>25</sup>. These studies rarely control for substances of abuse which can be an important confounding factor, that should be addressed in future studies.

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In summary, most data are currently available for alcohol but account for a lesser degree also for opioids and stimulants. Mostly through an alteration of gut microbiota and intestinal permeability, alcohol and substances of abuse, affect the gut-brain axis in several ways. There are still several question marks in human studies: the absence of dysbiosis in some SUD patients, the absence of microglial activation in PET-CT studies, and the exact correlation with symptoms and behaviors of SUD.

#### 8. Conclusion

- 5 Evidence of dysbiosis and disruption of the intestinal barrier induced by alcohol and other substances of abuse is plentiful, albeit mostly based upon preclinical studies, but the understanding of repercussions on the brain-gut axis and the symptomatology and behaviour of SUD is still incomplete. Further human-focused studies need to examine more closely the role of the vagus nerve and the role of circulating bacterial products,
- 10 in order to develop a more comprehensive view of the gut-brain axis in general. The microbiota produces hundreds of metabolites that have not yet been studied but could play a role in brain function and maturation. Regarding substances of abuse, and more specifically alcohol, clinical studies using brain structural and functional imaging could shed some light on the hypothesized neuroinflammatory process and its relationship
- 15 with addiction. Preclinical studies focusing on metabolites that are specific of bacteria species frequently found in AUD dysbiosis are also needed. Early stressful life events and alterations of the HPA axis have been shown to correlate with anxiety disorders<sup>212</sup>; it would be interesting to study microbiota and HPA alterations in AUD patients with history of childhood trauma. Translational approaches, for example using fecal matter transplant between humans and animals, can offer a more global view on the exact
  - repercussions of an SUD dysbiosis on the individual.

Substance	Increased bacterial families	Decreased bacterial families
Alcohol	Proteobacteria <sup>105,106</sup> Sutterella <sup>106</sup> Holdemania <sup>106</sup> Clostridium <sup>106</sup> Prevotellaceae <sup>107</sup> Enterobacteriaceae <sup>107</sup> Veillonellaceae <sup>107</sup> Streptococcaceae <sup>107</sup> Lachnospiraceae <sup>120</sup>	Bacteroidetes <sup>105</sup> Faecalibacterium <sup>106</sup> Ruminococcaceae <sup>120</sup>
Morphine	Proteobacteria <sup>164,165</sup>	Bacteroidetes <sup>164,165</sup> Firmicutes <sup>164,165</sup>
Cocaine	Bacteroidetes <sup>158,175</sup>	Mucispirillum <sup>171,172</sup> Ruminococcaceae <sup>171,172</sup> Lachnospiracea <sup>171,172</sup> Pseudoflavonifractor <sup>171,172</sup> Butryccicoccus <sup>171,172</sup>
Tobacco	Firmicutes <sup>181,182</sup> Actinobacteria <sup>181,182</sup>	Bacteroidetes <sup>181,182</sup> Proteobacteria <sup>181,182</sup>

Author	Title	Source	Sample	Main findings
Alcohol				
Mutlu (2012)	Colonic microbiome is altered in alcoholism	Am J Physiol Gastroint est Liver Physiol	48 alcoholics 18 healthy subjects	The microbiome is altered in a subset of alcoholics who present lower abundances of Bacteroidetes and higher ones of Proteobacteria. High levels of serum endotoxin are found in a subset.
Bjørkha ug (2019)	Characterizat ion of gut microbiota composition and functiuns in patients with chronic alcohol overconsump tion	Gut Microbes	Twenty-four patients with alcohol overconsump tion 18 control patients	Proteobacteria are found in higher relative abundance, while Faecalibacterium are found in lower relative abundance in the group of alcohol overconsumers. The group also had higher levels of Sutterella, Holdemania and Clostridium and lower concentration and percentage of butyric acid.
Chen (2011)	Characterizati on of fecal microbial communities in patients with liver cirrhosis	Hepatolo gy	36 patients with liver cirrhosis and 24 healthy controls	Higher prevalence of potentially pathogenic bacteria, such as Enterobacteriaceae and Streptococcaceae, with a reduction of beneficial populations such as Lachnospiraceae.
Dubinki na (2017)	Links of gut microbiota composition with alcohol dependence syndrome and alcoholic liver disease	Microbio me	72 patients with alcohol dependance syndrome and 27 with alcoholic liver cirrhosis	Alcoholic dependence was inversely associated with the levels of butyrate-producing species from the <i>Clostridiales</i> order, while the cirrhosis—with multiple members of the <i>Bacteroidales</i> order. The opportunist pathogens linked to alcoholic dependence included pro- inflammatory <i>Enterobacteria</i> <i>ceae</i> , while cirrhosis included

an increase of oral microbes in the gut.

Swanso n (2020)	Disrupted diurnal oscillation of gut-derived short chain fatty acids in shift workers drinking alcohol	Transl Res	42 subjects divided in three groups : patients with alcohol use disorder, day workers and night workers	Moderate alcohol suppresses SCFAs which was associated with increased colonic permeability
Leclerc q (2014)	Intestinal permeability, gut bacterial dysbiosis, and behavioral markers of alcohol- dependance severity	PNAS	44 AUD subjects before and after a period of three-week detoxification	Some, but not all, alcohol- dependent subjects developed gut leakiness, which was associated with higher scores of depression, anxiety, and alcohol craving after 3 wk of abstinence. Moreover, subjects with increased gut permeability also had altered composition and activity of the gut microbiota.
Leclerc q (2012)	Role of intestinal permability and inflammation in the biological and behavioral control of alcohol- dependant subjects	Brain Behav Immun	40 AUD subjects hospitalised for a three- week detoxification , 16 healthy subjects	Intestinal permeability and LPS were largely increased in alcohol-dependent subjects at T1 but recovered completely at T2. A low- grade inflammation was observed at T1 that partially decreased during withdrawal. At T1, pro-inflammatory cytokines were positively correlated with craving. At T2 however, the anti- inflammatory cytokine IL-10 was negatively correlated with depression, anxiety and craving.

Bala (2014)	Acute Binge Drinking Increases Serum Endotoxin and Bacterial DNA Levels in Healthy Individuals	Plos One	25 healthy individuals who underwent acute binge drinking for experiment	A single alcohol binge results in increased serum endotoxin levels
He (2009)	Increased MCP-1 and microgla in various regions of the human alcoholic brain	Exp Neurol.	Human post- mortem brain tissue (alcoholic vs healthy controls)	Significantly increased MCP- 1 levels across multiple alcoholic brain regions
Kalk (2017)	Decreased hippocampal translocator protein (18 kDa) expression in alcohol dependence: a [ <sup>11</sup> C]PBR28 PET study	Translati onal Psychiatr y	Nine alcohol dependent subjects and twenty controls	No evidence for increased microglial activation in ADP, as seen pre-clinically but instead lower glial density with lower TSPO expression
Hillmer (2017)	In vivo imaging of translocator protein, a marker of activated microglia, in alcohol dependance	Mol Psychiatr y	Fifteen AUD subjects and fifteen controls	Alcohol-dependent individuals exhibited less activated microglia

Leclerc q (2014)	Role of inflammatory pathways, blood mononuclear cells, and gut- derived bacterial products in alcohol dependance	Biol Psychiatr y	63 actively drinking patients and 14 healthy subjects	Activated proinflammatory pathways, in particular, IL-8 and IL-1 $\beta$ , were positively correlated with alcohol consumption and alcohol- craving scores.
Opioids				
Kang (2017)	The effect of gut microbiome on tolerance to morphine mediated antinociceptio n in mice	Sci Rep	Mice that underwent bacterial depletion with oral gavage of an antibiotic cocktail	The gastrointestinal microbiome is an important modulator of physiological responses induced by chronic morphine administration.
Wang (2018)	Morphine induces changes in the gut microbiome and metabolome in a morphine dependence model	Scientific Reports	Morphine murine model	Expansion of <i>Enterococcus</i> <i>faecalis</i> was strongly correlated with gut dysbiosis following morphine treatment, and alterations in deoxycholic acid (DCA) and phosphatidylethanolamines (PEs) were associated with opioid-induced metabolomic changes.
Meng (2013)	Morphine Induces Bacterial Translocation in Mice by Compromising Intestinal Barrier Function in a TLR- Dependent Manner	Plos One	Morphine murine model	Morphine induced gut epithelial barrier dysfunction and subsequent bacteria translocation are mediated by TLR signaling
Banerje e (2016)	Opiod-induced gut microbial disruption and bile	Mucosal Immunol	Morphine murine model	Chronic morphine treatment significantly alters the gut microbial composition and induces preferential

	dysregulation leads to gut barrier compromise and substained systemic			expansion of Gram-positive pathogenic and reduction in bile-deconjugating bacterial strains
Roussea ux (2007)	inflammation Lactobacillus acidophilus modulates intestinal pain and induces opiod and cannabinoid receptors	Nat Med	Mice and rats	Oral administration of specific Lactobacillus strains induced the expression of mu-opioid and cannabinoid receptors in intestinal epithelial cells, and mediated analgesic functions in the gut-similar to the effects of morphine.
Cocaine				
Scorza (2019)	Alterations in the Gut Microbiota of Rats Chronically Exposed to Volatilized Cocaine and Its Active Adulterants Caffeine and Phenacetin	Neurotox Res	Rats	Repeated exposure to volatilized cocaine, as well as to the adulterants caffeine and phenacetin, leads to changes in the gut microbiota
Chivero (2019)	Cocaine Induces Inflammatory Gut Milieu by Compromising the Mucosal Barrier Integrity and Altering the Gut Microbiota Colonization.	Sci Rep.	Mice	Cocaine exposure decreased colonization by <i>Mucispirillum</i> , <i>Ruminococcaceae</i> , <i>Lachnospiracea</i> , <i>Pseudoflavonifractor</i> and <i>Butryccicoccus</i> bacteria. It is also associated with inducing inflammatory processes in the gut, i.e. increased expression of pro- inflammatory cytokines, chemokines and activation of
Volpe (2014)	Associations of cocaine use and HIV infection with the intestinal microbiota,	J Stud Alcohol Drugs	26 men and 6 women, 15 HIV infected and 17 HIV uninfected	transcription factors Cocaine users had a higher relative abundance of Bacteroidetes (M $\pm$ SD = 57.0% $\pm$ 21 vs. 37.1% $\pm$ 23, p = .02) than nonusers.

	microbial translocation, and inflammation.			
Tobacco	a 1.			
Biederm	Smoking	Plos One	10 healthy	An increase
ann	Cessation		smoking	of Firmicutes and Actinobact
(2013)	Induces		subjects	eria and a lower proportion
	Profound		undergoing	of Bacteroidetes and Proteob
	Changes in the		controlled	acteria were found after
	Composition		smoking	smoking a 9-week period of
	of the		cessation.	smoking cessation
	Intestinal			
	Microbiota in			
	Humans			

Table 3. Summary of the main reviews on microbiome and susbtances of abuse.

Author	Title	Source
Shreiner (2015)	The gut microbiome in health and in disease	Curr Opin Gastroenterol
Rea (2016)	The microbiome: A key reulator of stress and neuroinflammation	Neurobiol Stress
Rooks (2016)	Gut, microbiota,	Nature Reviews
	metabolites and host immunity	Immunology
Wolf (2017)	Microglia in Physiology and Disease	Annu Rev Physiol
Mittal (2017)	Neurotransmitters: The Critical Modulators Regultating Gut-Brain Axis	J Cell Physiol
De Timary (2017)	A role for the peripheral immune system in the development of alcohol use disorders?	Neuropharmacology
Hillemacher (2018)	Alcohol, microbiome, and their effect on psychiatric	Prog Neuropsychopharmacol
	disorders	Biol Psychiatry
Cryan (2019)	The Microbiota-Gut-Brain Axis	Physiol Rev

Meroni (2019)	Alcohol or Gut Microbiota: Who is the Guilty?	Int J Mol Sci
Meckel (2019)	A potential role for the gut microbiome in substance use disorders	Psychopharmacology
Bastiaanssen (2019)	Making sense ofthe	Int J
$D_{2}$	Microbiome in Psychiatry	Neuropsychopharmacol
Bajaj (2019)	Alcohol, liver disease and	Nat Rev Gastroenterol
$B_{20}$ (2020)	the gut microbiota	Hepatol Behav Pharmacol
Ren (2020)	The role of the gut	DEHAV FHAIMACUI
Rueda-Ruzafa (2020)	microbiome in opiod use Opiod system influences gut-brain axis: Dysbiosis and related alterations	Pharmacol Res
Hayes (2020)	Microbes and mental	Frontiers in
	health: Can the microbiome help explain clinical heterogeneity in psychiatry?	Neuroendocrinology
Chinna Meyyappan	Effect of fecal microbiota	BMC Psychiatry
(2020)	transplant on symptoms of psychiatric disorders: a	
	systematic review	

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