

Gut Health

While we still have a lot to learn, research is showing just how important having a healthy gut is for our overall health and wellbeing. Not only do you feel better when your gut is healthy, but poor gut health is linked to a wide range of other health problems from digestive disorders to mental health issues.

Do I have a healthy gut?

Signs of good gut health include regular, well-formed bowel motions which are easy to pass. When your gut is healthy you feel well both physically and mentally and have good energy levels.

Signs of an unhealthy gut, on the other hand, include constipation and/or diarrhoea, excessive bloating and gas, fatigue and poor mood.

You may have heard of the gut microbiome. This refers to the trillions of bacteria that live in our gut. Most of these are beneficial and play an important role in digestion,

immune function, weight regulation and overall health. However, certain types of bacteria in your gut can contribute to health problems.

The right balance between good and bad bugs is the key to a healthy gut, and better overall health and wellbeing.

Having a diverse microbiome (i.e. a wide variety of different gut bugs) is also associated with better health.

What is a gut-friendly diet?

A gut-friendly diet is one that includes a wide range of high fibre, minimally processed plant foods including fruits, vegetables, legumes, wholegrains, nuts and seeds.

These foods feed our good bacteria and the greater variety of them we eat, the more diverse our gut microbiome. Not surprisingly, some foods and eating styles can also

negatively impact our gut health. In particular, research has shown that diets low in fibre-rich plant foods and high in saturated fat and animal foods cause negative changes in gut bacteria that increase intestinal inflammation and may increase the risk of diseases such as colon cancer.

Alcohol can also have a negative effect on gut bacteria.

Lifestyle tips

- **Exercise regularly.** Several studies have shown an association between increased fitness levels and levels of good bacteria in the gut. Another good reason to get moving!

While there are many things you can do each day to improve gut health, it's important not to ignore ongoing gut symptoms.

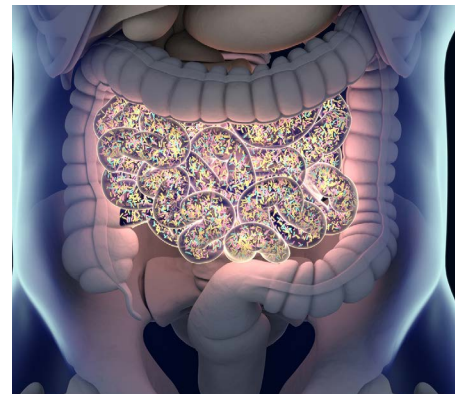
- **Manage stress.** Stress can negatively affect our gut health in many different ways and has been found to be associated with digestive conditions including irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

- **Avoid unnecessary use of antibiotics.** Antibiotics are life-saving when needed. However, they are often overused. Antibiotics can kill many of our good gut bugs, as well as the bad ones. If you do need to take a course of antibiotics, make sure you eat plenty of the foods that can help to boost your good bacteria. Taking a probiotic supplement may also help to restore some of your good gut bugs.

How can I improve my gut health?

There are many lifestyle changes you can make that can help to improve your gut health. But the most important of these is to eat a gut-friendly diet. Not surprisingly, the food we eat doesn't just provide us with nutrition, but also feeds our gut bacteria. Studies have shown that our gut microbiome can change, for better

or worse, within days of altering our diet. Nurturing your gut bacteria and creating a balanced microbiota can improve absorption of nutrients, boost immunity, help regulate digestion and improve your mood. So, adopting life-long healthy eating habits is important for a happy and healthy gut, which also improves mental health.



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Top foods for a healthy gut:

- Fill your plate at main meals with a variety of different coloured vegetables and salads – aim for at least five serves each day.
- Choose fibre-rich wholegrains such as low sugar wholegrain breakfast cereals, oats, barley, brown rice, wholegrain pasta, quinoa, freekeh, bulghur, dense wholegrain bread rather than refined grains.

When increasing your fibre intake it's best to do this gradually, as a sudden increase can cause wind and bloating. Drink plenty of fluids, particularly water as fibre absorbs fluid to make stools soft and easy to pass.

- Aim to include legumes in at least three main meals per week. Choose more plant protein (such as legumes, tempeh and tofu) over animal protein. Or reduce the amount of meat in casseroles, curries and stir-fries and bulk these up with legumes such as kidney beans, lentils and chickpeas.
- Focus on healthy fats from foods like extra-virgin olive oil, nuts, seeds and



avocado but avoid animal fats and high fat processed foods.

- Choose high fibre snack foods such as fresh fruit, raw vegetables, dried fruit, wholegrain crackers, nuts and seeds.
- Include foods rich in prebiotics, which have been described as fertilisers for our good gut bacteria. Prebiotic-rich foods include Jerusalem artichokes, garlic, onion, leeks, asparagus, green peas and legumes. Inulin is a well accepted prebiotic fibre extracted from the chicory plant which is added to some foods and beverages.
- Incorporate resistant starch, which provides important fuel for our good gut bacteria. Good food sources include firm bananas, legumes, cooked and cooled potatoes, and cooked and cooled pasta and rice.

Probiotics & fermented foods

Probiotics are foods, or food supplements, that contain live bacteria thought to be beneficial to us.

This includes yoghurt with live cultures and some cheeses and fermented foods. However, fermented foods and probiotics are not the same things.

Not all fermented foods contain live organisms and the strains of bacteria and their stability in fermented foods are not well understood. While there is some evidence suggesting potential health benefits of fermented foods, more research is needed.

In the meantime, if you enjoy fermented foods, certainly include them in your diet. When it comes to probiotics, there are many different strains and each has different effects on gut health.

So, if you choose to take a probiotic supplement, speak to your GP or dietitian first to make sure the one you choose is right for you.

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