



ONE SMALL CHANGE

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR GUT HEALTH

Searching for simple ways to boost your health? Look after your gut and your gut will help look after you, says nutritionist *Anita Bean*



Diverse vegetables and other plant-based foods that provide different types of dietary fibre are key to good gut health



Yogurt contains 'good' bacteria that add to your gut microbiota, supporting physical and mental wellbeing

PREBIOTICS VS PROBIOTICS WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

PREBIOTICS are carbohydrates that the body cannot digest but that make excellent food sources for 'good' microbes. Foods rich in prebiotics include beans, bananas, berries, lentils, chickpeas, Jerusalem artichokes, onions, garlic, asparagus and leeks.

PROBIOTICS are live bacteria that add to your gut microbiota. They occur naturally in fermented foods such as yogurt, kefir and tempeh, but may also be taken as a supplement.

You may think of the gut as simply an organ that allows you to eat, digest and absorb food – but an ever-growing body of research reveals there's a whole lot more going on down there. About 70% of the immune system resides in the gut or gut lining. It is also home to trillions of microbes, known as the gut microbiota or gut flora. These microbes are vital for physical and mental wellbeing – they interact with various systems in the body including the immune system, skin, heart and blood vessels, and even the brain.

Studies have shown that our gut microbes transform the foods we eat into thousands of chemical messengers, vitamins and enzymes that influence everything from body weight to mental health. Many things can affect the balance of microbes in our gut, but diet is undoubtedly a significant factor. Foods high in fat and sugar encourage the growth of 'bad' microbes, while foods high in fibre encourage 'good' microbes.

Is it really that big a deal? Yes, is the short answer. Having good gut health can strengthen your immunity, improve digestive and skin health, enhance your mood and

lower the risk of certain cancers, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. So it's worth looking after it.

The key to a healthy gut is a diversity of 'good' microbes. The best way to achieve this is by eating a wide variety of plant foods – fruit, vegetables, nuts, wholegrains and seeds as well as beans, chickpeas and lentils (which are high in prebiotics – see above). Diversity is key, because each food contains different types of fibre and nutrients that 'good' gut microbes thrive on. Fibre is your gut microbiota's favourite food, and each type of microbe likes a different type of dietary fibre, which is why that range of food is so important. NHS guidelines recommend 30g of fibre a day, but most people in the UK are getting less than 20g. »

'NURTURE YOUR GUT MICROBES BY EATING A WIDE VARIETY OF PLANT FOODS'



Fermented foods are a source of probiotics



'SET A GOAL OF EATING 30 DIFFERENT PLANT-BASED FOODS A WEEK'

If you want to start increasing the variety of plant foods in your diet, set a goal of eating around 30 different plant-based foods a week. That may sound like a lot, but you are probably eating more than you think already. Remember that plant-based foods include fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, nuts and seeds; pulses such as beans, chickpeas, lentils and peas; tofu, tempeh, herbs and spices, as well as soy-based and other plant-based dairy and meat alternatives.

Adding pumpkin or sunflower seeds, nut butter, or fruits such as blueberries, stewed apples and pears to your morning porridge is a simple way to increase the number of plant-based foods in your diet. Try experimenting with different wholegrains, such as wheat berries, quinoa, freekeh, barley, bulgur wheat, wild rice and red rice.

Add beans or lentils to curries, soups and stews. Buy a mixed bag of salad rather than one variety. Try different colours of the same vegetable – red, yellow and orange peppers; sweet and white potatoes; red and white cabbage. Foods don't always need to be fresh, either: tinned and frozen options are convenient, cost-effective and can do the job just as well.

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5 FOODS FOR YOUR GUT

BLUEBERRIES are one of the richest dietary sources of polyphenols – plant compounds which benefit gut health.

LENTILS and other pulses contain high levels of dietary fibre, including a prebiotic fibre (see page 115) called galactooligosaccharide, which promotes the growth of 'good' gut microbes.

LIVE YOGURT (dairy or soy-based) is one of the best sources of probiotics, the 'good' bacteria that can improve your gut health.

NUTS contain omega-3 fats, which are linked to a more diverse microbiota.

OATS are a rich source of fibre, including beta-glucans and resistant starch, which increase the growth of 'good' gut microbes.

Look out for the Waitrose Gut Health range in store and find a wealth of easy recipes at waitrose.com/healthyrecipes

Colourful fruit and vegetables, especially berries and plums, as well as nuts, coffee, tea and dark chocolate (containing at least 70% cocoa solids) are rich in polyphenols, naturally occurring plant compounds that also encourage the growth of health-promoting microbes.

Another way to nourish your gut microbiota is by eating probiotic-rich fermented foods (see panel above), including yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, miso, tempeh, kombucha, kimchi and some cheeses. The microbes in fermented foods, called probiotics, can increase your gut microbial diversity – although the benefits last only as long as you are eating these foods regularly.

Likewise, eating the wrong foods can tip the balance in your gut in favour of 'bad' microbes. According to the ZOE predict study – a large-scale, international nutritional research programme – ultra-processed foods that are low in fibre and high in sugar, salt and artificial additives can actually negatively impact gut health. These include soft drinks, white bread, processed meats and packaged snacks such as crisps, biscuits and sweets. Eat the right foods and your gut will thank you for it.

Health writer Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist specialising in sports nutrition. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook and The Runner's Cookbook.