

GUT INSTINCT

WORDS
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Did you know that there is a direct link between the gut and brain by way of trillions of bacteria? Keeping these bugs living in harmony in your gastrointestinal system is important to your physical and mental well-being.

Have you consumed yogurt or a probiotic drink because you were influenced by an ad claiming it could alleviate symptoms such as bloating, gas, constipation or diarrhoea? Are such products really good for our health?

As a nutritional therapist and functional medicine practitioner at The Nutrition Mentor (www.thenutritionmentor.com), I am glad to see that there has been an explosion of scientific research into the profound effects that bacteria residing in the human gastrointestinal (GI) tract have on health. To date, genetic sequencing has identified more than 1,300 species of bacteria in humans. In fact, our GI tract contains more than 100 trillion bacteria, and there are 100 times more bacteria genes than human

genes. This begs the question of whether we are more bacteria than human!

A gutful of bacteria

Think of this bacteria population — or microbiome — as an ecosystem. Like all ecosystems, this needs to be in balance for us to reap its benefits. A well-tended microbiome regulates our immune system, acts as a protective barrier against harmful substances or microorganisms, supports normal gut motility and detoxification of toxins, and helps to repair body tissues and renew cells. A healthy gut microbiome prevents cancer, regulates hormones, helps in the absorption of nutrients such as vitamins A and D, and produces neurotransmitters (which affect our moods and mental health) as well as vitamins (B group and K2).



Probiotic supplements can be used to replenish and rebalance gut bacteria; they are especially helpful after a course of antibiotics or any antimicrobial therapy.

Dysbiosis happens when the delicate balance between the different types of bacteria is disrupted, or when there is an overgrowth of harmful microorganisms such as viruses, yeasts and parasites. We may then develop food intolerances and sensitivities, autoimmune conditions, constipation, diarrhoea, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel diseases (such as Crohn's or ulcerative colitis), anxiety, depression, skin conditions (such as eczema), obesity and many more disorders.

Eating your way to a healthy gut

While a balanced gut microbiome is critical to robust health, there are other ways to achieve this besides consuming a commercially produced yogurt or probiotic drink.

To me, the best way to a healthy gut microbiome is through eating whole foods, particularly those that provide soluble fibre: sweet potato, yam, garlic, onions, leeks,

Jerusalem artichokes, chicory, apples, bananas, flax seeds, chia seeds, peas, beans and lentils.

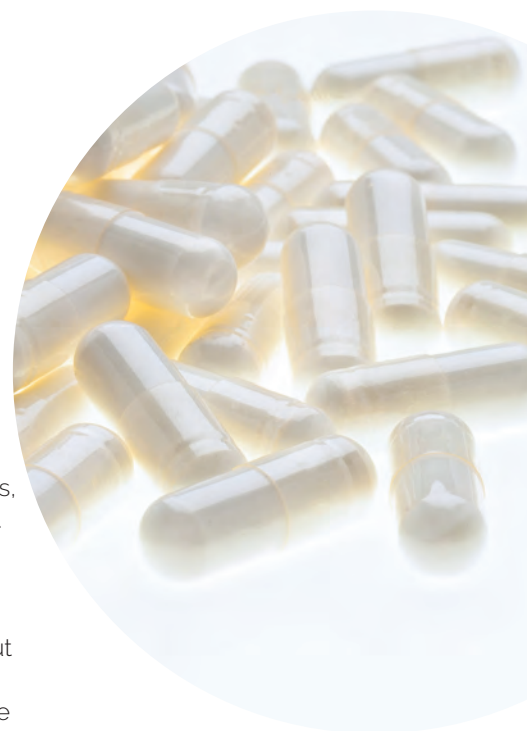
Fermented foods also support a healthy gut microbiome. These include dairy-based ones like cow's milk yogurt and kefir, and non-dairy ones like sauerkraut, kimchi, water kefir, coconut yogurt, coconut milk kefir and kombucha. Note that fermented foods are not suitable for people with intolerance to histamine.

Home-made fermented foods are better options than most commercial ones, which often contain added sugar and additives, and may make matters worse if you already have dysbiosis.

If you are not used to fermented foods, I would advise starting with a small amount (a teaspoon will do) and build up. Eating too much at once may result in bloating and gas as the bacteria from the fermented foods interact with the ones in your gut.

The gut-brain link

Did you know that our gut communicates with our brain?



BALANCING GUT MICROBIOME THROUGH FOOD



FOODS WITH SOLUBLE FIBRE

- Sweet Potato
- Yam
- Garlic
- Onion
- Leek
- Jerusalem Artichoke
- Chicory
- Apple
- Banana
- Flax Seeds
- Chia Seeds
- Peas
- Beans
- Lentils



FERMENTED FOODS

- Cow's Milk Yogurt
- Cow's Milk Kefir
- Sauerkraut
- Kimchi
- Water Kefir
- Coconut Yoghurt
- Kombucha





Our GI tract, like the brain, has a nervous system and more than 100 million neurons that produce at least 40 neurotransmitters — including dopamine, GABA and 90% of our total serotonin (often referred to as the 'happy' hormone) — all of which are important for our mental health. Gut bacteria influence the development of the nervous system and the production of neurotransmitters. They influence our stress response. Current research is looking into how different strains of bacteria are able to do this.

Stress management is also important. When the brain perceives stress, it sends signals to the gut to shut down the production of stomach acid and digestive juices. This makes it easier for pathogenic microorganisms to take up residence in our small and large intestines. Stress signals also slow down gut motility, causing a build-up of putrefied foods. This could lead to constipation as well as the feeding of harmful bacteria.

With the two-way communication, it's not a surprise that people who suffer from habitual constipation tend to be depressed as well.

Protect the ecosystem

Besides foods that are friendly to gut bacteria, there are other steps you can take to protect and nourish them.

- Use antibiotics only when necessary, as antibiotics kill off both harmful and beneficial bacteria, paving the GI terrain for any opportunistic microorganisms to take hold.
- Do not overuse anti-acid medications, as over-suppression of stomach acid can cause an overgrowth of harmful microorganisms, particularly in the small intestine. The irony is that indigestion and acid reflux are often not due to over-production of stomach acid, and may be contributed by low stomach acid instead, among other factors.
- Avoid or reduce intake of significantly processed and refined foods, which favour bad bugs such as yeasts.
- When travelling in less-developed countries, drink only from safe sources of water and eat food that has been properly cooked.

Probiotic supplements can be used to replenish and rebalance gut bacteria; they are especially helpful after a course of antibiotics or any antimicrobial therapy. These supplements contain good bugs, ranging from general lactobacillus and bifido strains to highly specialised ones used for specific purposes.

So it's not only what you eat and do but also how you think and feel that influences the gut microbiome, which in turn impact your health in many aspects. 🍏

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