



A healthy GUT

The digestive system plays an important role in your health, both physically and mentally. Here's how you can improve it.

Your digestive system is the engine that fuels your body. It breaks down and absorbs all the food and fluids you consume into nutrients.

Depending on what you've eaten it can take up to 72 hours for food to travel the length of the digestive tract (which includes the stomach, the small intestine and the large intestine).

The important role of the gut

While every step of the digestive system is important, the large intestine plays a very special role in keeping us healthy. Within this part of the body, often simply called the gut, tiny organisms called microbiota or flora help maintain gut health by taking the energy produced from the fermentation of carbohydrates.

Human gut microbiota is made up of more than 1000 different species of bacteria. We often have negative associations with bacteria. While you'll find plenty of bad bacteria in food that's been left out at

room temperature too long, interestingly, there are also many good bacteria.

These organisms aren't just essential for our digestive health; research shows that they're also important for the immune system, including the prevention and relief of some allergies as well as metabolic disorders such as obesity and diabetes.

There are also other benefits to having a healthy gut, says Jean Hailes naturopath Sandra Villella. "Scientists are now recognising the link between gut health and mental health. New studies are showing that microbiota can influence stress-related behaviours such as anxiety and depression."

Gut's best friend - fibre

One of the best ways to encourage good overall health is to eat a balanced whole food diet with lots of fibre-rich foods. There are many benefits to eating high fibre foods, including regular bowel movements, helping

you feel fuller, reducing blood glucose and cholesterol levels and reducing the risk of several diseases, including colorectal cancer and cardiovascular disease.

There's also a specific benefit to the gut: "Some fibre helps feed good bacteria," says Ms Villella. Examples of foods that are good sources of fibre include rye bread and cereals; brown rice; legumes; fruit and vegetables (skin on where possible); and nuts and seeds.

"Women should try to aim to eat at least 25g of fibre a day," says Ms Villella. A wholemeal slice of bread has about 2g of fibre, a large apple has around 5g and a cup of cooked chickpeas has around 12g. "Eating the recommended two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables each day and selecting high fibre grains, cereals, seeds and nuts will help you to reach the recommended amount," she says.

Prebiotics and probiotics

"One of the best ways to feed the good bacteria is to eat foods that are rich in probiotics and prebiotics," says Ms Villella. Many of us have heard of probiotics, the live bacteria found in fermented dairy products and often sold in capsule form in pharmacies. Probiotics introduce good bacteria into the gut and can be useful, for example, to restore gut health after a dose

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of antibiotics, which tend to wipe out good and bad bacteria.

Prebiotics, on the other hand, aren't actually bacteria. They're some of the dietary fibre found in plants, which stimulates the growth and activity of good bacteria. Specific foods that are rich in prebiotics include garlic, onions, asparagus, artichokes, legumes, sunflower and pumpkin seeds and brassica vegetables (such as cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli).

“Prebiotics basically act as a fertiliser for healthy bacteria that's already in the gut,” says Ms Vilella.

Of course, for those with health issues or on restricted diets, it's important to seek advice from a health professional before changing your eating habits.

3 THINGS TO KNOW

1. We need good bacteria to ensure we digest food properly
2. Good bacteria can be found in many foods such as legumes and vegetables
3. Fibre is particularly good at nourishing good bacteria

Recipe: An easy breakfast

Bircher muesli

Serves 2-4
Prep 15 mins

Ingredients

1 red apple
unpeeled

½ cup
rolled oats

2 dessert
spoons
roughly
chopped
almonds

2 dessert
spoons pepitas
(pumpkin
seeds)

2 dessert
spoons whole
linseeds

2 dessert
spoons
sunflower seeds

½ teaspoon
ground
cinnamon

1 cup yoghurt
(or ½ cup
yoghurt and ½
cup apple juice)

Raspberries,
plums or other
seasonal fruit

Method

Grate the apple. Mix with rolled oats, nuts, seeds and cinnamon. Add yoghurt and mix to combine. Cover and place in fridge overnight

In the morning, if a moister consistency is desired, add extra yoghurt, milk, soymilk or apple juice

Serve with a selection of fruit

Will keep in fridge for 2-3 days. The ingredients absorb the liquid so extra yoghurt (or other liquid) will need to be added on later days

Nutritional value

It's often said that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Studies show that skipping breakfast affects how much energy we expend. Without it, we're more likely to move less and burn less calories.

This dish contains whole foods that nourish and restore the gut microbiota. Raw rolled oats are a great source of resistant starch, which nourish good bacteria. Oats also help with appetite control and make us feel full for longer. Red apples, berries, plums and linseeds are rich in disease-fighting antioxidants called polyphenols. Pepitas and sunflower seeds are rich in the prebiotic galactooligosaccharides and almonds are a prebiotic-like food. Yoghurt containing live cultures of good gut bacteria may help by temporarily colonising the gut.



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