

Tips for a healthy gut: How to feed your amazing microbiome

By Teddi Nicolaus

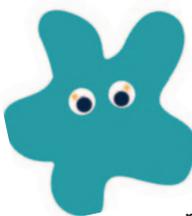
Your body is home to more than 30 trillion bugs — bacteria, fungi, viruses and other life forms.

This collection of critters makes up what scientists call the “human microbiome.”

The majority of these bugs — about 98% of them — live in your gut. Your gut microbiome converts the foods you eat into nutrients that are vital in all of your body’s functions.

“There are anywhere between 500 and 1,000 species of bacteria living in your gut,” says Jack Gilbert, PhD, a University of California-San Diego professor and microbiome researcher.

“When we say ‘gut,’ it is mostly your large intestine and your small intestine. The stomach has bacteria living in it, but it’s like a boiling lake of acid and very few bugs can survive there.”



The gut microbiome plays a central role in your health, influencing everything from immune function to metabolism, nutrition and mental health. Each of us hosts our own unique network of microbes, some of which we get from our mothers during birth, some genetic and some influenced by diet, age, lifestyle and environment.

“Your gut microbiome is the agricultural farmland of your body,” Gilbert says. “If you feed it the right kind of nutrients, it will keep you healthy and fit and nutritiously fed.”

It’s worth a try to diversify

Your gut bacteria eat what you do, so packing your plate with lots of different and colorful fruits and vegetables might have beneficial effects on your gut microbiome. Keep in mind that every single type of plant has a different type of fiber and that every different kind of fiber feeds a different type of bacteria in your gut.

“If I were trying to improve my gut health and didn’t have any health problems, I would absolutely start with diet, and I would try to increase the number of fruits and vegetables that I consumed each week,” says gut microbiome researcher Abigail Johnson, PhD, RDN, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

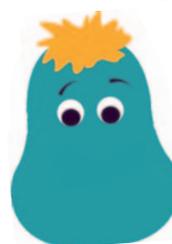
Varying what you eat is helpful as well. If you enjoy making smoothies, consider breaking away from your usual routine. In addition to fruit, toss in some spinach or kale, or maybe some broccoli or carrots. The combination of sweet fruit and flavorful vegetables will make for a gut-healthy beverage.



Pass the pickles, please

Probiotics are foods that naturally contain helpful, live bacteria your gut needs. Yogurt, sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, apple cider vinegar, kefir and many varieties of pickles are probiotics. They also have another thing in common: they’re fermented.

Fermentation has long been associated with preserving food and increasing its shelf life.



“If you are interested and really fascinated by this type of research and just want to do it as kind of an experiment to see what’s in your gut because that fascinates you, there is no harm in finding that information out,” Johnson says. “But it might be very costly.”

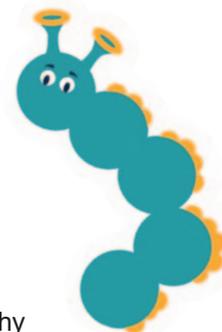


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The process, which involves the breakdown of carbohydrates by bacteria and yeast, promotes the growth of beneficial bacteria.

Early research shows that eating fermented foods could be beneficial for your gut as well, Johnson says.

While probiotics are also available in supplement form, such products aren’t regulated for effectiveness. As with vitamins and minerals, the best way to consume what your body needs to be healthy is through the food you eat.



Trust your gut, not a gimmicky test

Are at-home microbiome tests worth the investment? There are dozens on the market today, and they can be pricey.

Most at-home tests work by analyzing your poop, which you mail away and then receive a report telling you which bacteria are in your gut.

Before you decide to buy at-home tests, keep in mind that the scientific community isn’t on board with the trend yet. The research is still in its infancy, and the test results can be difficult to interpret, even by professionals.

Feed fiber to your friendly flora

If you want your gut to be in a healthy state, feed it fiber. Fiber is known as a “prebiotic,” which is a nutrient designed to feed microorganisms in your gut. Not to be confused with probiotics, prebiotics don’t contain bacteria. Instead, they’re a source of food for healthy bacteria. Your body can’t digest these fibers, but the healthy bacteria in your gut will certainly enjoy munching on them.

“If they get to eat a lot of fiber, they propagate, grow and will produce the chemicals that are essential to keep us healthy,” Gilbert says.

According to the National Institutes of Health, some good sources of prebiotics include leeks, asparagus, onions, wheat, garlic, chicory, oats, soybeans, and Jerusalem artichokes.

You’ll get plenty of prebiotics by including a wide variety of foods in your diet. Choose some every day!



Man relaxing on sofa, Dolgachov; microbes, Sofia Hobach; woman eating on sofa, Brothers91; woman with pickle jar, Pavle Bugarski