

A Guide to Digestive Wellness

Tips for Improving Gut Health



Keeping your digestive system healthy is important for your overall health. A healthy gut can help you feel better, boost your immune system, and even improve your mood. But what is “gut health,” and why does it matter? Let’s go over some basics to help you understand and make good choices for a healthy gut.

What is digestion and gut health?

Your digestive system is what breaks down the food you eat, takes in nutrients, and removes waste. But it also has trillions of tiny bacteria that make up your “gut microbiome.” These helpful bacteria play a big part in keeping you healthy. Here’s what you should know:

- The “**gut**” is another way to refer to our gastrointestinal tract (or GI tract, for short). It includes all parts of the body that we use to digest, absorb and process food.
- Our **gut microbiome** refers to the vast collection of microorganisms, or bacteria, living in our GI tract.¹
- While some **bacteria** are harmful and can trigger certain diseases, nearly all the bacteria found in the gut microbiome are helpful and even necessary to live a healthy life.
- Your gut needs the right mix of bacteria. This **balance** can be affected by what you eat, how you live, and some medicines. An imbalance can lead to changes in how your body regulates things like metabolism and inflammation.²

Why is our gut health important?

The health of your gut is crucial for protecting against illness and infections, thanks to the helpful bacteria in the gut microbiome. Gut health also influences brain function, impacting mood and energy levels.

Good gut health supports various aspects of health, including:

- Heart
- Brain
- Digestion
- Sleep
- Immune system
- Weight
- Skin
- Cancer risk

What causes problems for gut health?

Many factors can affect gut health, including:

- **Diet and Lifestyle:** Processed foods, low-fibre diets, and excessive sugar can negatively impact the gut microbiome.
- **Illness:** According to Health Canada, illnesses and common digestive system disorders, including Inflammatory Bowel Disease, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Celiac Disease, Leaky Gut Syndrome, and viral infections can disrupt gut health.
- **Antibiotics:** According to Health Canada, certain antibiotics can disrupt the gut balance.

How to improve your gut health

- **Get enough good sleep:** Poor sleep can negatively impact the gut, reducing the diversity of beneficial bacteria. Aim for 7-8 hours per night.³
- **Make efforts to relieve stress:** Chronic stress disrupts gut bacteria and weakens digestion. Practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation, or yoga.⁴
- **Reduce processed foods and sugar:** These can disrupt gut bacteria, leading to inflammation and poor digestion. Opt for whole, unprocessed foods instead.
- **Eat lots of fibre-rich foods:** Include fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and legumes.
- **Choose whole grain foods:** Select whole grains like brown rice, quinoa, and oats instead of refined grains.
- **Get some physical activity that you enjoy:** Do this most days of the week (if not every day).
- **Reduce antibiotics:** To protect the microbiome, only use antibiotics if your doctor prescribes them for a specific infection.
- **Try to include foods with prebiotics and probiotics:**⁵
 - **Prebiotics:** Found in fibre-rich foods that feed the helpful probiotic organisms in our gut. Found in asparagus, citrus fruits, berries, bananas, apples, steel-cut oats, onions, garlic, almonds, and more.
 - **Probiotics:** Foods that contain live microorganisms that boost the good bacteria in our gut. Found in fermented foods like yogurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut, miso, and kombucha.

Lifestyle Practices for Long-Term Digestive Health

Eating well, being active, and getting enough sleep can help you keep your gut healthy. Reducing stress and including foods with probiotics and prebiotics will help your gut stay balanced. Making small changes over time is the best way to keep your digestion and overall health on track.

Disclaimer:

The information provided in this article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Always consult with a healthcare provider for advice suited to your personal health needs.

Always consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your diet, lifestyle, or medication, especially if you have any underlying health conditions or are experiencing ongoing digestive issues. The information here does not replace professional diagnosis or treatment. If you have concerns about your digestive health, please seek guidance from a healthcare provider.

Sources:

1. Canadian Society of Intestinal Research. The Microbiome.
2. Canadian Society of Intestinal Research. Probiotics, Prebiotics, and the Microbiome.
3. Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology. Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines.
4. Canadian Digestive Health Foundation. Mindfulness, yoga, and the gut-brain connection.
5. Canadian Digestive Health Foundation. Probiotics vs Prebiotics.