

Gut Educated

Are you sure my body is housing an 'ecosystem?' I hear you ask sceptically. Yes, you got that right, an ecosystem of tens of trillions of bacterial cells (beneficial or detrimental; your choice). They have far reaching effects from the health of your skin and your mood, to heart health and mental health; yes it all stems from your gut. Recent studies have led to scientists calling the gut a 'second brain'. This is because if the nerve between brain and gut (the vagus nerve) were cut, the gut would function independently. You can almost think of the gut and the brain as 2 friends feeding off each other's vibe. So basically:

Your gut is a big deal.

How can we improve this inbuilt, unique, exceptional ecosystem that each of us have? What are the do's and don'ts. Let's start with 2 very common terms that I'm sure you have heard of: prebiotics and probiotics; the 2 lines of attack that are beneficial to the gut. These are hot topics in nutrition and have been for a while now.

PREBIOTICS: Think of this as fertilisers for your inner garden

Prebiotics feed and help our gut bacteria grow strong to ultimately benefit our overall ecosystem. Many plant foods such as asparagus, bananas (the unripened green ones that no one wants), berries, tomatoes, garlic, onions and legumes contain different types of prebiotics. Prebiotics can also be manufactured artificially and added into foods or supplements.

PROBIOTICS: The 21st century antibiotics?

'These constitute live beneficial bacteria and/or yeasts that naturally live in your body. Whenever I heard of bacteria, I always pictured the 'bad guys' that make us sick. However, you have two kinds of bacteria constantly living in and on your

body

– good bacteria and bad bacteria. Probiotics are made up of good bacteria that help keep your body healthy and working well. Foods like yogurts, kefir, tempeh and even kimchi fall within the ‘probiotic’ category. Here’s a tip; stay off antibiotics unless you really need them, a sore throat or a common cold should pass on its own without the need for antibiotics as they nuke our body’s immune system, (you may as well wave buh bye to the good bacteria). When unavoidable, always follow a course of antibiotics with a course of probiotics, to repopulate the gut with beneficial bacteria.

WHAT INFLUENCES YOUR GUT? WHAT MAKES IT UNIQUE TO EACH INDIVIDUAL?

Infant Feeding; bottle or breast?

We all enter into the world with an immune system that requires ‘building up’. As new parents, second guessing what’s best for our child seems like the only way we know. The best way to influence and pave a clear path to strength for an infant immune system is via the gut. Human milk is a microbial marvel. Not to worry if that’s not the route you go down, there are also some nutrient dense formulas now available with prebiotics that can provide similar support.

Stress and exercise: relax your mind & stay active to reset your gut.

‘It’s true, what goes on in your gut impacts what goes on in your brain and vice versa. Finding ways to de-stress by doing what works for you, whether it’s meditation, swimming the lengths of a pool or even working towards setting up a proper sleep regime can go a long way to support your gut and mental health. A good starting point is to try and gradually cut down on screen time a couple of hours before bed. Did you know that athletes have a more diverse gut? No, you don’t need to become an Olympian but a few hours of movement a week (or more if you can fit it in!) should work a charm.

Alcohol: swap that alcohol for some Kombucha

Alcohol (especially excessive consumption) normally goes hand in hand with cravings for junk food, which causes digestive mayhem! Especially since excessive alcohol consumption can lead to inflammation of the gut, resulting in increased permeability (allowing easier crossing into the gut of not just food particles but also toxins). This can ultimately lead to food intolerances where you wonder why your body can no longer handle foods it previously could. If you are an excessive drinker, maybe it's time to take alcohol out of your vodkabulary.

Diet: processed foods are space invaders.

'Remember, that ecosystem of trillions of bacteria need variety to thrive. Look at swapping out tinned sauces for fresh sauces and drinking at least 2 litres of water a day. The aim is to introduce large amounts of fruit and veg with an emphasis on plant rather than animal based foods. And needless to say, keep up those pre and probiotics! Digestion is an abrasive activity so taking breaks between meals, such as an early dinner followed by a late breakfast or brunch, is just what your system needs to improve your gut bacteria.

'The famous saying 'no news is good news' applies here. If you haven't heard from your gut in a while, and haven't had any bloating or abdominal pain, looks like you might be doing just fine. Never underestimate the importance of gut health when it comes to your body and well being. Making simple positive changes like more fiber in your diet, more exercise, and less unnecessary medication . And as always, please don't use this article as a substitute for direct medical advice from your doctor or any other qualified clinician. And remember, when in doubt, trust your gut.

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