

Keeping Your Gut Healthy

Want to know the #1 rule for a healthy life? Here it is: Glowing health starts with a rock-solid gut.

When your gut is happy, you feel good all over. That's because you're digesting your food efficiently, keeping your immune system in check, and optimizing your levels of mood-enhancing chemicals. (Did you know that 70 percent of your immune system is in your gut—and that 90 percent of your serotonin is produced there?)

When your gut is sick, on the other hand, you're miserable. And it's not just the constipation, diarrhea, bloating, and gas—although that's bad enough. An unhealthy gut can also lead to immune problems, inflammation, anxiety, depression, and even skin problems.

So give your gut the respect it deserves! Here are the 12 most powerful steps you can take to keep it happy and healthy and free yourself from gastrointestinal woes.

1. Drink bone broth

Modern life is tough on your gut. Fast foods, stress, antibiotics, over-the-counter medications, too little sleep, and too little exercise can all transform your microbiome—that's the trillions of beneficial bugs in your gut—from healthy to sick. When that happens, your gut can get inflamed and become "leaky," allowing toxins to escape from it and leading to system-wide inflammation.

The best cure for this problem is an ancient one: bone broth. The gelatin in bone broth coats and soothes your gut, gently allowing it to heal and become strong. In addition, bone broth is packed with amino acids that help rebuild damaged gut tissues. That's why a cup of bone broth once a day is one of the biggest gifts you can give your gut.

2. Make collagen a daily habit

Collagen is loaded with glycine, an amino acid that's one of nature's most potent inflammation fighters. The less inflamed your gut is, the healthier your gut microbiome is, and the stronger your gut wall is. So get in the collagen habit, adding it to smoothies, soups, stews, chili, sauces, and even pancake and waffle batter.

3. Eat lots of fiber

Fiber keeps food moving efficiently through your digestive tract, helping you avoid constipation and bloat. In addition, your gut microbes can ferment soluble fiber to create butyrate, a short-chain fatty acid that helps keep your gut wall solid. So load your plate with green, leafy vegetables every day.

4. Try resistant starch

Resistant starch is a type of starch that resists being digested in your small intestine. Instead, it's fermented in your large intestine. [Here's](#) a post that tells you all about it.

Resistant starch is great for your gut because the fermentation process that breaks it down in your lower intestine creates more butyrate. In addition, resistant starch acts as "fertilizer" for your gut bugs.

5. Give grains and dairy the boot

Contrary to popular belief, you don't need to eat these two food groups. That's because you can get every nutrient in grains and dairy from other sources.

So try cutting down on them, or cutting them out entirely. Dairy products are one of the biggest causes of gas, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation, while grains—especially gluten-containing grains—are [highly inflammatory](#).

6. Say "no" to sugar

A diet that's heavy in sugar is bad for you, and it's bad for your gut bugs as well. Research suggests that a high-sugar diet may [impair the production of proteins that promote the growth of beneficial gut microbes](#). That's yet another reason to ditch sugary treats, and to avoid over-indulging in carbohydrates that turn into sugar in your body.

7. Eat prebiotic and probiotic foods

Think of your microbiome as a garden. To grow lush, beautiful plants, you need two things: plenty of seeds, and fertile soil.

Probiotic foods, such as kimchi, sauerkraut, and pickles, contain the good bacteria you need to seed your internal garden. (Be sure to buy refrigerated, unpasteurized versions, because pasteurization kills the good bugs.) Prebiotic foods, such as asparagus, onions, garlic, and jicama, provide the fertilizer those bugs need to flourish.

8. Stick to a schedule

Just like you, your gut bugs have circadian rhythms. In fact, research shows that the circadian rhythms of your gut microbes affect where they are within the GI tract at different times of day as well as which metabolites they produce. Keep them on a regular schedule, by eating your meals around the same time each day, sticking to a good bedtime routine, and avoiding too much artificial light in the evening, and they'll perform at their best.

9. Handle your stress

Stress is bad news for your gut, because it shifts your body from "rest and digest" mode to "fight or flight" mode. When you're stressed all the time, it can lead to constipation, diarrhea, bloating, and GI pain. In addition, stress makes your gut more "leaky," allowing toxins to escape and cause body-wide inflammation.

While you can't eliminate all the stress in your life—who doesn't have money problems, family troubles, or work stress?—you can take better control over it.

Here are some of the best stress-busters:

- Meditation
- Journaling
- Yoga and Tai Chi
- Massages
- Epsom salt baths
- Aromatherapy
- Nature walks
- Hobbies

And here's another tip for conquering stress: Stop trying to be a super-hero. Instead of saying "yes" to every request, strategize your yesses. For instance, if your schedule is already full, let someone else bake the cookies for the PTA meeting or coach the kids' soccer team. Use the time you save to read a good book, take a hike, or get together with friends.

10. Minimize antibiotic use

Antibiotics wreak havoc on your gut microbiome, slaughtering good bugs and allowing bad bugs to gain a foothold. The damage done by a single course of antibiotics can take months to overcome, and sometimes the repercussions last for years.

Occasionally, of course, you may need antibiotics to knock out a stubborn infection. But at least 30 percent of the time, the antibiotics that doctors prescribe aren't necessary. So take antibiotics if there's a good reason for using them—but avoid them unless you truly need them.

11. Get plenty of vitamin D

The majority of people are deficient in this vitamin, and there's a good chance you're one of them. That's a big problem for your gut, because a vitamin D deficiency throws your gut microbiome out of whack and can even lead to colitis. So get a little sunshine every day, take a vitamin D supplement, and eat foods rich in vitamin D, such as salmon, tuna, egg yolks, and mushrooms exposed to ultraviolet light.

12. Try an elimination diet.

If you make all of these positive changes and you're still troubled by gut problems, you may be sensitive to some foods that other people can eat easily. For instance, many people have trouble with fruits and vegetables that fall in the nightshade category, such as tomatoes and peppers. Others have trouble with high-oxalate foods, such as spinach and rhubarb, while still others don't deal well with foods that fall into the FODMAPS category. And, of course, some people have allergies to specific foods such as shellfish or eggs.

To see if you're sensitive or allergic to any foods, cut down to a bare-bones diet of foods you know you can tolerate well. (If you're not sure where to start, a nutritionist or functional medicine doctor can help you.) Then slowly add in new foods, waiting a couple of days in between each addition. If you develop bloating, gas, or diarrhea after an addition, remove that food from your diet. Later on, test it again and see if you get the same result. If so, you'll know to avoid it in the future. A little detective work can result in a happy gut!