

Ten things that can disrupt a healthy gut



Lifestyle choices to improve gut health

The gut is both strong and delicate at the same time. We're learning more about positive lifestyle choices and those that can weaken the gut's defenses.

Here are ten lifestyle choices or changes that you can make to help your gut:

1. Increase fiber in your diet through foods such as fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts and legumes. Fiber helps feed healthy gut bacteria, which is important for health and weight control. Also, include more fermented foods to your diet. Fermented foods have high levels of probiotics or healthy bacteria and include foods like yogurt, sauerkraut, miso, kimchi and kombucha.¹
2. Reduce your consumption of sugar, artificial sweeteners and preservatives and processed foods. Also eat less red meat and high-fat foods.¹
3. Exercise more often. Exercise improves the health of the microbiome by increasing diversity and healthy gut bacteria. It is also generally recommended for weight loss.¹
4. Use an appropriate amount of hand sanitizer.² Hand sanitizer kills healthy, helpful bacteria along with the bad. Instead, wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and water rather than using hand sanitizers, when possible.
5. Moderate the use of over-the-counter painkillers for aches and pains. Recent research reveals that some of the most commonly taken painkillers can have dramatic negative effects on the gut's microbiome. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), ibuprofen for example, can adversely impact gut bacteria in a fashion similar to antibiotics. Always consult your healthcare provider about any medicines, including over-the-counter medications, that you take.³
6. Use natural alternatives to harsh chemicals for lighter cleaning jobs, such as vinegar or lemon juice.⁴
7. Studies recommend not to overuse antibiotics. Research has shown that it can take up to a year for some gut bacteria to recover from a course of antibiotics.²
8. Don't smoke. Smoking isn't just bad for your lungs and heart. Smoking can also affect the healthy balance of microorganisms in your gut.⁵
9. Avoid stress. Prolonged stress can alter the balance of bacteria that live in your intestines, leading to immune system problems. This can contribute to irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which can cause cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, gas, diarrhea and constipation.⁶
10. Don't lose sleep. A number of gastrointestinal functions are regulated by circadian rhythms, also known as your sleep/wake cycle or "body clock." These functions include gastric acid production and small intestinal nutrient absorption.⁷

Sources:

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5. Gui, X., et al. Effect of cigarette smoke on gut microbiota: State of knowledge, *Frontiers in Physiology*, 2021; 12:673341.
6. Madison, A., et al. Stress, depression, diet and the gut microbiota: Human-bacteria interactions at the core of psychoneuroimmunology and nutrition, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Science*, 2019 August;28:105-110.
7. Vernia, F., et al. Sleep disorders related to nutrition and digestive diseases: A neglected clinical condition, *International Journal of Medical Sciences*, 2021 Jan 1;18(3):593-603.

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