

How do I Improve My Gut Health?

by Kaiser Permanente



When it comes to your health, the old saying “listen to your gut” is sound advice. While many people think gut health is all about digestion, a healthy gut can benefit your whole body — and mind.

Need tips for keeping your gut healthy? Kaiser Permanente’s Regina Ragasa, DO, a family doctor certified in lifestyle medicine, explains everything you need to know.

What exactly is gut health?

Your intestinal system is home to **trillions of “good” and “bad” bacteria** known as your microbiome. According to Dr. Ragasa, when people talk about gut health, they’re really talking about the **right balance of good and bad bacteria in your microbiome**.

- Too much bad bacteria can be harmful because it promotes chronic inflammation, which is linked to health conditions like irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, cancer, and heart disease.¹
- Good bacteria produce short-chain fatty acids, which decrease inflammation throughout the body.

Dr. Ragasa also says that gut bacteria can also affect your mood and health. Some studies have even linked certain gut bacteria to depression.²

Signs of poor gut health

If you experience any of the following conditions regularly, it may be a sign that your gut has more bad bacteria than good:

- Abdominal cramping
- Bloating
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Gas

“Some people may also experience menstrual cramps, brain fog, or have difficulty losing weight,” says Dr. Ragasa.

Fixing your gut health starts with a healthy diet.

What to eat for a healthy gut

A balanced microbiome is all about eating foods that promote the growth of healthy bacteria and suppress the growth of bad bacteria.

Get your probiotics and prebiotics

Probiotics are good bacteria that replenish your microbiome. They occur naturally in yogurt and fermented foods like kimchi, sauerkraut, pickles, miso, and kombucha. And you don’t need to eat large servings to benefit. Enjoy probiotics as side dishes or in small portions. For example, says Dr. Ragasa, nonalcoholic kombucha is often sold in 16-ounce bottles, but the recommended daily serving is only 4 ounces.

While probiotics get a lot of attention, Dr. Ragasa says people should focus more on prebiotics, which feed the good bacteria and help them grow.

The prebiotic she recommends most is fiber, which is found in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains like brown rice, barley, and oatmeal.

Limit meat

To prevent the growth of bad bacteria, Dr. Ragasa recommends limiting the amount of meat you eat, including fish and lean chicken.

"I put meat in the same category as cake," she says. "It's something we can have once in a while, but not 2 to 3 times a day." She recommends enjoying it **just a couple of times a week**.

Aim for variety

Since different foods contain different kinds of probiotics, it's also important to **eat a variety of food**. "**The more diverse the microbiome, the healthier the gut**," says Dr. Ragasa.

A simple strategy for variety: **Eat fruits and vegetables that are in season**. "If you're eating foods that are out of season, it means that you're probably eating certain types of foods all the time," she says.

Are probiotic supplements necessary?

While there are aisles full of probiotic pills and powders, it's unclear whether these supplements will boost your microbiome health.

"I definitely have patients that have reported benefits from probiotic supplements, so I'm not going to tell them to stop taking them," says Dr. Ragasa. "And then there are some who don't feel any benefit. For those people, I don't think it's necessary to keep taking them, but rather focus on prebiotics and feeding the good bacteria."

Keep it simple

If you remember one thing about maintaining gut health, make it this: **Eat fresh food**. Avoid processed foods such as those that are canned, frozen, or packaged.

"Those foods don't have what we need for a healthy gut," says Dr. Ragasa. *"The more it looks like it grew from the earth, the more it belongs on your plate."*

¹ "[Understanding Acute Chronic Inflammation](#)," Harvard Health Publishing, accessed August 8, 2022.

² "[Gut Microbe Linked to Depression in Large Health Study](#)," Science.org, February 4, 2022.