

5 Ways You Can Improve Your Gut Health Today



I'm not a great fan of cabbages, but I decided to grow them on my small farm a couple of months back. Maybe I thought I'd make some extra cash by hawking them off to friends and family. Anywho, when harvest time came, my wife asked me to hand over a whole bunch of them. She wanted to try something. She chopped them up and stashed the shredded leaves into glass jars, apparently to let them ferment. A few days later she spooned the jar's contents onto a plate. "Eat, it's great for your gut health," she said.

How Will I Know My Gut is Unhealthy?

Gut health? It's actually what it sounds like, though you may not have heard the two words used together. To be precise, your gut refers to the system that takes in the food you eat, breaks it down, absorbs the good stuff and ejects the waste. It comprises the stomach, small intestines, colon and all the other organs that make up your [digestive tract](#). When it's not in good shape, you'll know it by the bloated feeling and the excess amount of gas in your bowels. You may also suffer from the runs or persistent heartburn. Other symptoms such as disrupted sleep patterns and easily falling prey to the flu may be attributed to other factors but have also been linked to a dysfunctional gut.

The discomfort of a constipated or gassy stomach aside, poor gut health means your body is not assimilating the nutrients it needs to function optimally. This should worry you. But don't despair. If you're grappling with any of these symptoms, here are five ways to dispel them, or keep them from showing up.

Switch Up Your Diet

Ironically, one of the best ways to help your gut get its groove back is to eat better. This is where the fermented cabbage story I began with applies. My better half had cottoned on to the sauerkraut rage that has been sweeping through social media since spring. A quick search on Instagram will throw up oodles of posts showing how to turn your red or white cabbage into sauerkraut. The taste might take a bit of getting used to, but the benefits for your gut are worth braving the tangy flavor.

[Sauerkraut is a great source of probiotics](#), which contribute to the trillions of bacteria (microbiota) that live in your intestines. These are the good kind of bacteria that are essential to the health of your digestive system. A recent study showed that the consumption of unpasteurized sauerkraut enhanced the production of microbiota. The prebiotics naturally contained in leafy vegetables are also thought to combat the uncomfortable effects of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), including preventing diarrhea. They also fight against the more nefarious strains of bacteria.

The benefits of sour cabbage to the human body go far beyond the alimentary canal. It contains nutrients that can build your overall immunity and keep both cancer and heart disease at bay.

If sour cabbage proves too much for your taste buds, you can try yogurt, tempeh, kombucha or other kinds of fermented foods. They all contain the kind of bacteria your gut needs to work as it should. All the probiotics your gut needs will be found in sufficient supply in these foods but in some cases, usually to cope with a specific condition, your dietician may recommend probiotic supplements.

More than prebiotics and probiotics

Your gut needs more than prebiotics and probiotics to play its part in maintaining a healthy you. To ensure the smooth passage of waste out of your digestive system, you need to supply it with fiber, which is crucial in making good-quality stool. Fiber also slows down the movement of food through the intestines enough for optimal assimilation of nutrients into the bloodstream. This is another reason you should consider making sauerkraut a household staple.

But, yes, there are many other foods that will give you that all-important roughage. Lettuce, spinach, kale, broccoli and other cousins of cabbage are well-documented sources of fiber. As are green peas, beans and several other legumes. Roots like carrots and beets and fruits like watermelons will also provide you with precious fiber. Whole-wheat bread, whole-wheat spaghetti, bran flakes and brown rice combine fiber with energy-giving carbohydrates.

As you up your intake of probiotic and fiber-rich foods, you will do well to cut down on ultra-processed foods with low nutritional value. Your gut will thank you when you ditch those super-sweet desserts with no shred of fiber or packaged snacks laden with sugar, salt, and a

stack of preservatives. Why? [Research](#) has shown that excessive intake of refined sugar disrupts the intestinal barrier, causing an imbalance in the gut's microbiota that, in turn, can lead to IBS and a host of other bowel complications.

Take More Water

You already know a good many reasons you should drink the recommended three liters of water a day. But staying well-hydrated will also work wonders for your gut. 1) It will tenderize your poop for smooth bowel movement- i.e. bye-bye to constipation. 2) Water helps break down food to ease the absorption of nutrients. 3) H₂O is a double whammy for the bacteria in your gut- it [contributes to shaping the human gut microbiome](#) while getting rid of the gut's pathogens.

Take your time (when eating)

A while back I was doing some digging for another health piece when I stumbled across an English word I didn't know existed- [mastication](#). It may be just a fancy way of saying 'chewing' but this term has a deeper connotation. Unlike chewing, mastication is about more than grinding food into chunks that can glide down your throat. It's about starting the digestive process the right way; breaking food down in the mouth so that digestion can begin. Letting the digestive enzymes in your saliva work their magic to completion.

What happens at the top end of your digestive tract when you eat has implications on how food is received and processed in the lower parts. Larger chunks of food present a smaller surface area for digestive juices in the gut to work on, hampering the absorption of nutrients. This can lead to functional indigestion, which will result in abdominal pain or discomfort that you can do without.

Do some exercise

What does working up a sweat have to do with how well your gut processes food? Stretching and contracting your abdominal muscles stimulates your intestines allowing them to ease the flow of food. A regular cycling routine will help you achieve this. Even dedicating just half an hour a day to brisk walking is enough to improve your digestive system's performance. For even better results, you can try out movements that target the pelvic floor muscles. They require close muscle-mind coordination, but when you get it right you will activate muscles that will improve your bowel control by optimizing [peristalsis](#). The same can be said for a number of yoga poses. Learn to do the downward dog, the upward dog, the boat and the triangle correctly, and make them a part of your weekly routine. The improved core strength and more relaxed abs they'll give you will augur well for your digestion.

About the author: Philip Kimonge has been a correspondent for several entertainment magazines and has established himself as a content creator for various websites over the past decade. When he is not writing, Philip is doing his best to create a safe space for financial transactions as an AML/CFT expert, or taking a power nap. He is the proud product of the love and sacrifices of many strong black women

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