- Virus

Healthy gut bacteria may protect during COVID

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THE BACTERIA living in your small intestine may contribute to the risk for long coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) after infection with SARS-CoV-2, new findings suggest.

Researchers analyzed the "gut microbiome" in 116 COVID-19 patients in Hong Kong in 2020, when regulations required that every infected person be hospitalized. More than 80% were mildly or moderately ill, but more than 75% had at least one persistent symptom.

After six months, the most common symptoms were fatigue (reported by 31%), poor memory (28%), hair loss (22%), anxiety (21%) and sleep disturbances (21%), according to a report published on Tuesday in Gut.

Analyses of stool samples obtained at hospital admission and over the succeeding months showed long COVID patients "had a less diverse and less abundant microbiome," said Siew C. Ng of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. "Patients who didn't develop long COVID had a gut microbiome similar to that of people without COVID-19."

Lack of "friendly" immunity-boosting Bifidobacteria species was strongly associated with persistent respiratory symptoms, Ms. Ng noted.

While the study cannot prove that healthy gut organisms prevent long COVID, the findings suggest "maintaining a healthy and balanced gut microbiota via diet, avoidance of antibiotics if possible, exercise and supplementing with depleted bacteria species including Bifidobacteria" might be helpful, she said. —