- Digestive system

WHY GUT HEALTH MATTERS

Why your gastrointestinal system is actually the key to feeling better and living longer

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When we eat for the needs of our gut, your microbes will thrive Megan Rossi Gut health scientist



Gut health is all the rage – but what actually is it and why does it have so much bearing on our overall health?

Australian Megan Rossi, a gut health scientist and research fellow at King's College London, says the gut can influence longevity, organs, multiple bodily functions including skin, mental wellbeing and has been linked with reducing the risk of more than 70 chronic diseases.

It comprises the gastrointestinal system, including the stomach, intestines and colon.

"Your gut microbiome can only look after you if you look after it in return and, when we eat for the needs of our gut, your microbes will thrive and you will flourish," Dr Rossi said.

Gastroenterologist Jon Watson said having a healthy gut involved the right balance of microbiota within the bowel.

"The microbiome is the group of bacteria, viruses and fungi that live with us in our gut," he said.

“We all have a slightly different microbiome, and we think most of that is determined in early childhood, although we can change it as our life goes on.
“In recent years, we’ve increasingly begun to understand that the mix of bacteria, viruses and fungi that we have in the gut help very much to determine how healthy our gut is in terms of absorbing food, processing food, passing nutrition through.”
Professor Watson warned that an unhealthy microbiome could cause disorders in a number of different organs.
Dr Rossi, who is known as The Gut Health Doctor, said it was a myth that taking a restrictive approach to eating was best for your gut health.
“Unless you have a medically diagnosed reason for doing so, the science doesn’t support this,” she said.
Sydneysider Elizabeth Griffin is glad gut health is in the spotlight. The 29-year-old lives with Crohn’s disease, a type of inflammatory bowel disease that has no cure.
She was diagnosed in 2019 after symptoms including unexplained weight loss and pain.
“I didn’t even know Crohn’s was a thing ... I just thought I must have some weird virus,” she said.
In 2021, she had about 40cm of her small intestine removed due to bowel obstruction.
“There’s still limitations on what I can and can’t eat,” the administration worker said.
Dairy-heavy foods like chocolate can make her feel ill and she leans on staples like rice and eggs.
Ms Griffin said growing awareness around gut health and conditions was fantastic.
“Knowledge is power, and especially with conditions like this that can happen to younger people who might not be fully aware of them,” she said.
“Having that knowledge
there for people, as well as ways to just make themselves healthier, is great.”
NEW SERIES: GET YOUR GUT HEALTH RIGHT
Over the next three weeks, we will run a weekly series on how Australians can look after their gut health.
Next Thursday, we will take a closer look at common gut diseases and innovative treatments.
Each week, experts will be sharing simple ways you can improve your gut health through diet and lifestyle.
This week, they share some foods to embrace and their opinions on supplements.
EAT THESE FOODS
Dietitian and nutritionist Jemma O’Hanlon said probiotic yoghurt was a food people could easily introduce into their diet to improve gut health.
It contained healthy bacteria for the gut and people should aim for a yoghurt with at least one billion cfu (colony forming units), she explained.
“Start with day with yoghurt served with natural muesli and berries, or why not have a tub of yoghurt as a midafternoon snack,” she said.
“Plain probiotic yoghurt works well as a replacement for sour cream in recipes.”
Ms O’Hanlon said legumes like beans and lentils were rich in fibre and prebiotics that fed the good bacteria in our gut, were very affordable and could be purchased canned and whipped up into a delicious winter warmer like lentil dal. And she said, when cooked and cooled, potatoes developed resistant starch that fed the good bacteria in our gut.

“It’s estimated in Australia that we’re only meeting about one-quarter of our resistant starch needs, and cooked and cooled potatoes are an excellent source,” Ms O’Hanlon, an ambassador for International Day of Potato, said.

Dr Rossi said people should aim for diversity in their diet, and research highlighted the importance of eating a variety of plants, the target being 30 plus different types per week.

Easy swaps, like a mixed bag of berries or seeds instead of one type, could make this more attainable, she said. She also urged people to chew their food well.

WHAT ABOUT SUPPLEMENTS?

Dr Rossi urged people to get specific with their supplements and said it was it was essential to take a targeted rather than a “just-in-case” approach.

She warned many supplements could counteract each other – for example, magnesium supplements could impact iron absorption.

Prof Watson said there was “not much evidence” around supplements being effective for gut health, but specific vitamins for people found to be deficient in those could be helpful.

Probiotics needed to survive the acid environment in the stomach and travel about 5m down the small intestine to the upper part of the large bowel, he said, so may “not do you too much good in terms of not much getting to where it’s supposed to”.