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Gut health and circadian rhythms

New Straits Times · 19 Jun 2026 · meera@nst.com.my

ACROSS Asia, generations of parents passed down the same quiet wisdom — eat well when the sun is up and keep the evenings light. Today, research is echoing what our ancestors instinctively understood: when our meals and daily habits align with the body's internal clock, the gut is one of the first to benefit.



Herbalife Asia Pacific nutrition education and training lead Dr Vipada Sae-Lao says most of us don't realise that our bodies are remarkably "punctual".

The circadian rhythm, or the body's internal 24-hour clock, quietly controls sleep, hunger and the performance of every system throughout the day.

"This clock is not just in the brain — it lives in nearly every cell, keeping the entire body in sync with the natural rhythm of day and night."

Research shows that our gut bacteria and body clock are in constant "conversation", each influencing the other to keep our metabolism, body weight, insulin sensitivity, cardiovascular, immunity and overall health on track.

The challenge is that modern life has quietly disrupted this balance.

Late nights, irregular meals, shift work and scrolling on screens after dark throw the internal clock off rhythm.

A healthy adult typically needs seven to nine hours of sleep daily for proper physical and cognitive recovery. When this internal clock falls out of sync, the gut follows, raising the risk of weight gain, blood sugar imbalances and inflammation over time.

The Health Ministry has noted that diseases of the digestive system were among the top ten causes of hospitalisation in Malaysia in 2024.

The good news? Restoring this balance is more achievable than it sounds.

Starting the day with nutrientdense, balanced meals and spacing them evenly through the day supports stable energy, efficient digestion, and optimal metabolic function. Equally important is following a consistent timing, preferably within an eight to 12-hour window.

Hydration is also crucial and hydration, like eating, works best when practised consciously.

Vipada says a glass of water before the first meal kickstarts digestion and sets the body clock in motion.

“Consistent hydration throughout the day supports the role of dietary fibre in keeping digestion moving smoothly, while easing off fluids in the evening gives the body the signal it needs to rest and repair overnight.”

Finally, maintaining consistent sleep and wake times can support restful sleep that gut bacteria can align with.