

## WELL INFORMED

## 6 Things You Should Know About Your Gut Bacteria

The right balance will keep your digestive system running smoothly and make you a whole lot more comfortable.

By | **Mary Cheung, MD, Gastroenterologist** | **Barbara Brody, Writer**



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If you've been blessed with an iron stomach, you probably haven't given much thought to the inner workings of your digestive system. But if you're someone who's often bloated, constipated, or running to the bathroom with diarrhea, you've likely heard that an imbalance of bacteria in your gut could be to blame. So what, exactly, does that mean, and how do you begin to fix it?

Gut bacteria is pretty much what it sounds like: microorganisms that live in your digestive tract. There are viruses and fungi in your gut, too, says Dr. Mary Cheung, director of gastrointestinal motility at Northwell Health's Long Island Jewish Medical Center. Experts refer to this combo of microorganisms as your microbiome, and, just like your diet, you want it to be well-balanced.

Here's why a healthy microbiome is so important and what to do if yours has gotten out of whack.

## There's a battle of good vs. evil going on inside your body

In a germ-phobic world filled with hand sanitizers and antibacterial cleaning products, "bacteria" tends to equal "bad." But the truth is that not all bacteria are bad. You have bacteria in and all over your body, and much of it is just hanging out, doing nothing, says Dr. Cheung. But the bacteria in your intestines isn't inert; it has some really important jobs, namely breaking down food so you can absorb nutrients and fighting back against dangerous bacteria that has the potential to make you sick. (There are good viruses and fungi, too, though most of the science to date has focused on the bad stuff.)

When you have an ample supply of "good" bacteria in your gut, it leaves less room for the bad guys. "Think of it like real estate," says Dr. Cheung. "When there's a proliferation of good bacteria, dangerous ones such as clostridium—which can cause severe diarrhea and be life-threatening—don't have room to take over."

## The right balance keeps your whole body happy and healthy

Like the famous children's book by Taro Gomi professes, everyone poops. It's normal. Everyone has gas, too. A healthy gut microbiome helps you stay regular and keeps cramping and bloating at bay.

The benefits extend beyond your digestive tract: A healthy gut, says Dr. Cheung, helps your immune system remain active but not too active (which is the key problem in autoimmune conditions). The right mix of bacteria and other microorganisms also fight inflammation. If inflammation rises in the gut, "it can potentially cause systemic inflammation, including in the brain," says Dr. Cheung.

"There's no hard evidence, but some people experience 'brain fog' when eating certain foods, such as those that contain gluten," says Dr. Cheung. "It's probably because of an intolerance or allergy that has caused inflammation."

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Dr. Mary Cheung, director of gastrointestinal motility

## Food intolerances, antibiotics, and stomach bugs can wreak havoc on your internal ecosystem

It's not hard to spot signs of discord in your gut: If you have erratic bowel movements, cramping, bloating, or "very noxious farting" and it's been that way for a while, chances are something has gone awry, says Dr. Cheung.

There are many ways that the bad organisms can gain a foothold. Eating something that you're allergic or intolerant to is one possibility, as is having a digestive syndrome like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or slow motility (meaning it takes too long for food to move through the system). Taking antibiotics for any reason can also mess with the balance by wiping out too many of the good guys. So can catching a stomach virus or getting food poisoning that comes with lots of vomiting and diarrhea.

Some people also have a specific issue called small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO), in which bacteria from the large intestines have mistakenly made their way into the small intestines.

## Figure out what went wrong so you can make it right

In order to restore harmony in your gut, you may have to do a little detective work (and perhaps see a gastroenterologist) to get to the root of the problem. If you have a food intolerance, for instance, you'll need to remove offending food from your diet. For slow motility, your doctor might advise you to eat small amounts more often throughout the day and load up on fiber. If you have SIBO, you'll need antibiotics.

Most people, however, don't have any of these issues, despite having cramping, bloating, and irregular bowel habits. If that sounds like you—or you just suffered through a stomach virus or are taking antibiotics for another ailment—you may need to work to repair your internal ecosystem. The fix: probiotics.

Probiotics are good bacteria that are naturally found in foods like yogurt (assuming it contains "live active cultures") and kimchi, a traditional Korean side dish made from fermented cabbage and other vegetables. Kefir, sauerkraut, and miso soup are good sources, too.

You can try eating these foods more often and see if it makes a difference, says Dr. Cheung, but a better bet once you already have a problem may be to start taking a probiotic supplement.

There are loads of probiotic supplements on the market, but they're not all created equal. Two key factors to consider when making your choice are survivability and the specific bacterial strain.

In order for a probiotic to help you, it has to be able to bypass your stomach. The stomach is very acidic, and it will wipe out most bacteria (including good ones). To make sure a probiotic reaches your intestines, choose one that has a protective coating.

You should also know that probiotics contain different strains, and there's more research to back up certain ones. The best-studied ones are lactobacillus and saccharomyces (it's actually a type of yeast).

Probiotics aren't a cure-all, and they'll only help you if your initial problem was a lack of good bacteria. Dr. Cheung's advice: Try them for a month, and if you still don't feel better, it's time to see (or revisit) your doctor.

## Next Steps and Useful Resources

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