



Love your Gut

New research says your gut is the key to your wellness. Nutritionist Belinda Kirkpatrick takes a closer look at why it's time to give your gut some love.

If you think you're hearing the words 'gut health' more than you were, say, this time five years ago, you're not wrong. New research is revealing just how complex and important our gut is to our overall health and happiness and it's nabbing headlines everywhere. We are taking notice, too. The Google search "improving gut health" increased by 250% in the US last year and UK sales of digestive remedies is set to reach 333 million pounds by 2021, according to Euromonitor.

While you might know that kombucha makes for a happy gut (something you likely couldn't pronounce five years ago, yet is expected to triple in worldwide market value from 2015 to 2020) it's far more complex than that. Let's break it down.

Why should you care about gut health?

Over 2,500 years ago, Hippocrates said, "All diseases begin in the gut". This shows incredible wisdom, as science has only recently caught up with the fact that it's true: gut health is incredibly important and poor gut health can lead to many health conditions including depression, acne, auto-immune conditions, weight gain, diabetes and hormonal imbalances.

Why are our guts damaged?

Modern life is often not gut friendly. It starts in childhood, when overly anxious parents use anti-bacterial wipes/lotions/creams constantly, keep their babies and children away from dirt and over-wash the skin. This keeps the good and bad bugs away from us, but we need these as they are essential in helping build up immunity. As we get older, even more factors contribute to poor gut health, including stress, eating too quickly, recurrent use of medications such as antibiotics, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs

and the pill, a lack of fibre (80% of us don't consume enough), too much sugar, processed grains and alcohol, food intolerances and toxin exposure.

What are symptoms of poor gut health?

Symptoms may include classic digestive issues such as bloating, heartburn, abdominal pain, nausea, burping, flatulence and bowel problems such as constipation or diarrhoea. It is also estimated that around 30% of people with poor gut health don't experience any digestive upset, but may present with brain fog, joint pain, acne, eczema, immune and autoimmune issues, hormonal imbalances, mood disorders and so much more.

What is the microbiome?

Your gut microbiome refers to the trillions of bacteria, fungi and other microbes that live in your digestive system. Research shows the gut microbiome plays an important role in your health. It is mind-blowing to think we have about 10 times as many microbial cells as we have human cells.

What is leaky gut (scientifically known as increased intestinal permeability)?

Our digestive system is lined with a barrier that's designed to keep all waste products within, before they are excreted from the body via bowel movements. These waste products include things like partially digested food, toxins, bugs and residues from things like plastics or personal care products. While keeping the nasties in, the digestive system is also designed to let certain things back into our bloodstream, like the vitamins and nutrients we get from our food. An unhealthy gut lining isn't able to keep this barrier intact and it can start to let waste products back into



the bloodstream. This is known as leaky gut and it is thought to trigger inflammation and changes in the bacteria that could lead to problems within the digestive tract and beyond.

What is the connection between gut health and mental health?

Neurons are the cells found in the brain and central nervous system that tell your body how to behave. There are thought to be over 100 billion neurons in the human brain. We now know the gut also contains neurons and it is thought there are at least five times as many neurons in the gut. This is one of the reasons why, when we feel nervous or excited, we may feel nauseous, need to run to the toilet, or have butterflies in our stomach.

The brain produces neurotransmitters to control our feelings and emotions. Interestingly, even more of these neurotransmitters are produced by the gut and the microbes that live there. It is estimated that 90% of our serotonin – our happy hormone – is produced in the gut. It is serotonin that regulates our mood, how we sleep and relax and connects gut and brain. The gut bacteria also produce dopamine, which is important for motivation.

This shows how our gut bacteria are essential for keeping our mental health strong. Without adequate production of these important neurotransmitters, we can be left feeling anxious or depressed.

What can we eat to improve our gut? What is a gut healthy diet?

A gut healthy diet is one that focuses on fresh whole foods and contains a minimum of processed foods and sugar. For optimal gut health, aim for at least 50% of your diet to be vegetables or salad. Also include a variety of legumes, nuts and seeds for extra fibre. Eating a wider variety of foods leads to a wider variety of good bacteria in your gut, which is the key to good health and longevity.

Try to include some fermented foods. These contain live bacteria and include kimchee, sauerkraut, kefir, miso and kombucha. Resistant starch is starch that resists digestion in the small intestine and makes a good food for the bacteria to thrive on in the large intestine. Sources include green banana flour, cooked and cooled potatoes, chickpeas and kidney beans.



Eating slowly in a stress-free environment has also shown to be good for your gut health. Chewing slowly and eating mindfully can help your digestive system work optimally and encourages healthy digestion. Stop using antibacterial wipes, sprays and hand cleansers, all of which disrupt our microbiome and instead, use regular soap and water for washing your hands or benches.

It can be good to also add a probiotic supplement to give your good bugs an extra boost. Look for one that contains multiple strains and rotate it with other brands and strains every few months.

Belinda Kirkpatrick is an expert nutritionist and naturopath with over 12 years' clinical experience. Besides running a busy clinic in Sydney, Australia, Belinda lectures in nutrition and naturopathy and is a regular television and media presenter on health and dietary topics. Last year, Belinda published her first book, *Healthy Hormones*, with Ainsley Johnstone, which features expert naturopathic advice, 50 recipes and tips on lifestyle and nutrition. It is available for purchase at all good bookstores or on Amazon.