# Nutrition for Gut Health

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Gut health is a very trending topic and for good reason as it is related to all other aspects of our health including immune, hormone, brain and mental health. As a dietitian, almost every client I see comes to me with a problem that stems from an unhealthy gut microbiome. There are several strategies to improve the balance of good/bad bacteria. Let's discuss the relationship between nutrition and gut health, what a ''healthy gut'' actually means, and the best strategies to improve your gut bacteria balance.

**What are signs of a healthy gut?**

- **Regular and Pain-free Bowel Movements:** Keeping track of your bowel movements is a good way to keep tabs on your gut health. While everyone's body is different, most healthcare providers agree that having a BM anywhere from 3 times a day to 3 times a week can be considered healthy. That said, what's normal for you might not be normal for someone else. Also shape, color, and consistency of BMs are also important indicators to watch. Healthy BMs should be smooth, firm, and easy to pass.
- **Consistent Energy:** If you consistently make it through the day without needing a nap or caffeine, it's a good sign that your body is getting the right nutrients and absorbing them properly. Digesting food requires a lot of energy. If your digestive system isn't functioning properly, your body might send more stored energy to the stomach or intestines than other internal systems.
- **Normal Amount of Gas and Bloating:** Gas is a natural part of the digestive process, and releasing it prevents it from building up in the intestines or stomach. In fact, most healthy people pass gas up to 21 times per day. That said, excess gas can lead to abdominal pain, discomfort, and bloating. This happens if you eat too many gas-producing foods (beans, starch, lactose) at one time.
- **Mental Health:** Gut health is closely tied to your ability to concentrate and stay alert. If you experience frequent brain fog or struggle to stay focused, poor gut health could be the culprit. Chronic stress and depression can alter the balance of microbiota in the digestive tract, increase inflammation, and impact the body's metabolic response to food.

**What Causes Poor Gut Health?**

- **Food allergy or sensitivity:** Food allergies and sensitivities can trigger multiple digestive issues. Symptoms can vary depending on the condition's type and severity, but common issues include diarrhea, abdominal pain, nausea, and vomiting.
- **Celiac disease:** Celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder that causes damage to the small intestine when a person consumes gluten. It can impact the body's ability to absorb nutrients and lead to symptoms like chronic fatigue, diarrhea, constipation, gas, and bloating.
- **Imbalanced diet:** Your gut needs a variety of nutrients to thrive. Consuming too many foods or drinks high in sugar, artificial sweeteners, saturated and/or trans fats, and animal proteins can contribute to poor gut health and increase the risk of developing certain digestive conditions.
- **Chronic stress:** Over time, high levels of stress can alter microbiota composition in the gut and lead to a bacterial imbalance. Stress can also increase gut motility (the movement of food through the body), resulting in bouts of diarrhea and/or abdominal pain.

- **Smoking:** People who smoke are more likely to experience acid reflux and peptic ulcers. Smoking can also make these conditions harder to treat and increase the risk of developing Crohn's disease and/or cancers of the digestive organs.
- **Medications:** Certain medications can throw off the bacterial balance in the gut and trigger several digestive symptoms. If you experience digestive issues after starting a new medication, you should discuss your symptoms with your healthcare provider.

**How do I test for food-related issues?**

If you notice an increase in digestive symptoms after eating, you might have a food allergy, intolerance, or sensitivity. These can be difficult to identify on your own, so it's important to talk with a healthcare provider about testing options.

- **Food allergy:** An immunoglobulin E (IgE) food allergy test may be a helpful tool in the process of determining if you have a food allergy. Healthcare providers can perform a blood test or skin prick test to measure your immune system's reaction to certain foods.
- **Food intolerance:** This means that your body can't properly digest certain foods. Healthcare providers can test for certain intolerances such as SIBO using a hydrogen breath test.
- **Food Sensitivity:** An elimination diet and careful observation may help identify food sensitivities. Though these are non-clinical diagnoses, you can feel better knowing what your GI tract is sensitive to and modify your lifestyle to accommodate.

**How To Improve Your Gut Health**

**Exercise Regularly:** Getting into a regular exercise routine is a great way to help support healthy digestion. Physical activity strengthens the diaphragm and abdominal wall and increases blood flow to muscles in the digestive system. Because the colon responds to movement, this can help ease constipation and get bowel movements back on schedule.

**Get Enough Sleep:** Sleep is essential for maintaining both digestive and overall health. Inadequate sleep can interfere with digestion and worsen conditions like GERD and inflammatory bowel disease. If you can, try to get at least seven hours of sleep each night. This helps reduce inflammation and allows your body to reduce the production of cortisol, a stress hormone that can interfere with healthy gut bacteria.

**Reduce Stress:** If you struggle with digestive issues, finding healthy ways to reduce stress and anxiety could help ease your symptoms. Both short-term and long-term stress can disrupt gut function and worsen symptoms of IBD or IBS. To combat this, start by identifying your main stressors and consider how your body responds to them. If you can, try restructuring or reducing stressful tasks and reach out to a mental health professional for help.

**Eat a Balanced Diet**

Eating the right foods can go a long way in improving your gut health. Limiting foods high in trans-fat, sugar, and salt can help support healthy gut bacteria and reduce the risk of developing certain digestive conditions. If you have a food allergy or sensitivity, try to avoid foods and drinks that trigger your symptoms. If your diet consists of a lot of fried or processed foods, try swapping them out for foods high in fiber and probiotics. Fiber can reduce constipation and improve bowel transit

time, while probiotics support healthy bacteria balance in the gut. If your current diet isn't agreeing with you, try slowly integrating some of these gut-friendly foods:

- High Fiber Foods: increasing fiber in the diet is an absolute must. Here are a few of my personal favorite sources: chia seeds, nuts, legumes, cruciferous veggies (cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, Brussels sprouts), berries (raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries), winter squash (butternut squash and acorn squash) and avocado.
- Prebiotic foods: besides the high fiber foods mentioned above, other pro-biotic rich foods include asparagus, garlic, onion, Jerusalem artichokes, chicory, oats, leeks, bananas (that are less ripe and more green), Dandelion greens, and spinach.
- Probiotic foods: Most probiotic foods are fermented foods that contain living organisms. These include kefir, kimchi, tempeh, miso, kombucha, yogurt, sauerkraut, and sourdough bread.
- Anti-inflammatory foods: these foods play a natural role in reducing inflammation and providing anti-inflammatory pathways promoting the health of our gut! These foods include salmon, flax seeds, chia seeds, berries, tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, ginger root, spices like turmeric, and walnuts.

## Simple Red Lentil Dal

Recipe from loveyourgut.com

**Ingredients**

1 large onion, finely chopped
500g peeled and de-seeded butternut squash (approximately half), cut into 2cm cubes
2 tbsp sunflower oil
5 regular fresh tomatoes, chopped
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
30g fresh ginger, peeled and finely grated
2 tsp ground cumin
½ tsp ground turmeric
1 fresh, long, mild red chili, deseeded
225g dried red lentils
100g baby spinach leaves
2 tbsp chopped coriander leaves to serve

**Directions**

- Sweat the onion and butternut squash with a little oil for 10 minutes in a covered saucepan or large lidded frying pan. They should begin to caramelize.
- Add the tomatoes, garlic, ginger, cumin and turmeric. Cut the chili in half lengthways and finely chop half. Add this to the saucepan. Cut the other half of the chili into thin strips and reserve to finish the dish.
- Add the red lentils and 1 liter of water to the saucepan and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat slightly and cook for 20 minutes. Add the spinach, which just needs to wilt for 2 minutes. The dal should be thick and the butternut squash tender.
- Add a little oil to a frying pan and quickly sauté the strips of chili. Serve the dal in bowls scattered with coriander and strips of chili. Serve with brown rice or flatbread and chutney on the side.