



5 expert-recommended  
ways to protect against—and  
heal—stomach troubles  
**By Sonia Weiser**

# Gut Check

Judging from marketing campaigns and celebrity endorsements, it may seem as if a functioning digestive system is just a cup of Greek yogurt and a shot of apple-cider vinegar away. But as tempting as the idea of a cure-all adjustment to your diet may be, it's not that simple. The microbiome—the trillions of protozoa, viruses, bacteria and fungi inside the body that help digestion—is unique to each individual, which makes prescribing an identical course of action to everyone about as useful as trying to unlock every iPhone with the same thumbprint.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, there's been an increase in evidence pointing toward the impact of the microbiome on overall health. "You would never think that the type of bacteria that make up your body could play a role in diabetes, or cancer, or inflammation," says Dr. Rabia De Latour, a gastroenterologist at NYU Langone Health, yet that's what research is suggesting. She predicts that the next wave of medicine will prioritize protecting the microbiome and decreasing our overreliance on antibiotics, which can kill the good bacteria in the body along with destroying the bad.

For now, more over-the-counter ways to improve gut health have cropped up. Unfortunately, because of the individuality of the microbiome, some of the aids that people swear by—whether they're supplements, teas, herbs or other purported panaceas—may not always produce the desired results.

That said, there are some science-backed best practices to help shape up your gut on the inside.

### ✓ **Go back to the basics**

First things first: What are you eating? "The typical American diet is really heavy in fat and low in fruits and vegetables, and that's not creating a good environment for a gut," says Kathleen Johnson, a registered dietitian at Johns Hopkins Integrative Medicine and Digestive Center. Instead, she advises patients to aim for a balanced diet that emphasizes variety. "Having a balanced diet is more important than eating a bunch of raspberries," she says. While eating the same nutrient-rich diet every day is obviously a better choice than choosing one with processed sugar or saturated fat, it still won't give you all the vitamins and nutrients needed to create and maintain a healthy microbiome.

Johnson suggests using the MyPlate website from the U.S.

Department of Agriculture for meal-plan ideas that correspond to your dietary needs and exercise levels, and finding alternative foods to mix up your intake. She also recommends sticking to three meals per day rather than continually snacking, and avoiding a restrictive approach to dieting—eating from a limited, repetitive menu—as that can slow your metabolism, intensify bloating and constipation, and even lead to other medical concerns like heart problems and muscle atrophy.

### ✓ **Eat organic**

It may seem like the question of whether organic produce is really better for you is still undecided; a 2016 survey from Pew Research Center concluded that Americans are nearly split over whether they believe eating organic makes a difference for well-being. But research is starting to back up its health benefits. One analysis of 343 peer-reviewed studies comparing organic and conventional produce found that organic crops have more antioxidants than their conventional counterparts. The study also reported that organic crops have a lower level of the toxic metal cadmium and less pesticide residue.

Research is still emerging on the potential gut impacts of eating organic, but De Latour points to a recent study in the journal *Frontiers in Microbiology* as a possible signal. It found that while organic apples and conventional apples contained the same number of bacteria, organic apples had a more diverse range of microbes than conventional apples, which may introduce a broader spectrum of helpful bacteria to your own microbiome.

### ✓ **Reconsider supplements and fad diets**

Plenty of social-media posts and (dubious) articles tout the benefits of capsules and powders marketed to instantly shrink your

waistline, remove toxins from the body or improve digestion. “I think that one of the biggest myths is that you need all these extra things in order for your digestion system to work properly,” says Johnson. In reality, our bodies are designed to be able to regulate themselves without having to switch to a paleo or keto diet or chug a kale-and-turmeric smoothie every evening. “I know there’s tons of people who swear that apple-cider vinegar keeps you healthy, but there’s no science to back that up,” says De Latour. Even so, she says, incorporating apple-cider vinegar in moderation is unlikely to cause negative side effects—so if you try it and like it, then there’s probably no reason not to use it.

However, she warns against teas advertised as digestive aids. “A lot of the teas that promote gut health are really just laxative teas” and may even harm the liver, she says. Instead, opt for a diet rich in fiber and drink plenty of water.

In general, packaged foods or beverages that claim to save your gut—including probiotic-touting beverages like kombucha—should be met with skepticism. Not all fermenting

methods are the same, and it can be hard to tell what you’re really getting. “Everybody gravitates toward these fermented foods for probiotics, and quite frankly, they don’t really have a lot of probiotics in them,” says Johnson. “Your body creates probiotics, so we don’t always necessarily need to take probiotics. Our body can create them if we have enough of the right food”—specifically prebiotics including garlic, onion and fibers, like those in oatmeal. “All of that will be used to fuel your gut to create probiotics.”

### ✓ Think outside the stomach

Gut health is more than a reflection of what you eat, and elements beyond your diet can hurt, as well as help, a problematic gastrointestinal system. These can include components of your lifestyle like sleep schedule, stress levels and exercise regimens.

They can also include your mind-set. When you’re nervous, you may feel “butterflies” in your stomach or have trouble mustering up an appetite. That’s no coincidence. Your gut hosts millions of neurons that make up the enteric nervous system, which has earned the reputation of a “second brain.” The nerve cells within the gastrointestinal tract are in direct communication with your central nervous system, and while their primary purpose is to direct food processing, they also affect your mood.

Dr. Emeran Mayer, a gastroenterologist at UCLA Health and author of *The Mind-Gut Connection*, describes the connection as circular: stress-related changes in the brain are mirrored in the gut, and vice versa. This phenomenon has been observed through animal microbiome studies conducted in the past few years and reports from patients. “If you are a chronically stressed or anxious person, you will have a different gut based on that top-down communication,” he says. Inversely, the theory goes that a low-fiber diet powered by sugar and fat may damage the small intestine, allowing bacteria to leak through the gut, circulate and ultimately reach the brain and alter cognitive functioning.

For this reason, a gastroenterologist may prescribe psychiatric medication, such as antidepressants, for digestive complaints. “We use them when all other interventions haven’t really yielded results, and see how our patients do,” says De Latour. “They tend to take some time to show impact, so we have to manage expectations, as there isn’t an immediate response.”

For people with one stress-related disease, irritable bowel syndrome



*Eating a diet rich in fiber and whole foods helps stomachs function as they should*

Early research points to potential gut-health benefits of eating organic



(IBS), research has found that the more stressors they face, the more likely they'll experience flare-ups in abdominal pain accompanied by constipation, diarrhea or other gastrointestinal ailments. More research is needed to figure out how the gut-brain connection works and the mechanisms behind it, says De Latour. "But we know for sure that there is a definite connection."

### ✓ Try a different style of eating

For people with IBS and some other GI disorders, De Latour suggests trying a diet low in fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides and polyols (otherwise known as FODMAPs). Foods that are high in these short-chain carbohydrates—like beans, many fruits and vegetables like apples and asparagus, wheat and rye, and anything containing artificial sweeteners—aren't absorbed well by the small intestine and can cause gas, bloating and pain for sensitive stomachs. Studies have found that sticking to a low-FODMAP diet—though no easy feat—can significantly reduce symptoms of IBS.

**The mind-gut connection is circular; stress-related changes in the brain are mirrored in the gut, and vice versa**

Tweaking what's on the menu can be especially helpful for women with belly pain. In part because of fluctuating hormone levels, women are twice as likely as men to have IBS and may experience worse symptoms around their periods. "Women have been suffering with issues of constipation, diarrhea and bloating for years," says Johnson, but without a specific medical test to diagnose IBS, they may never receive a diagnosis or concrete advice regarding treatment. However, she says, "there's a lot from a nutrition and lifestyle standpoint that can be done that will completely change their lives." One piece of advice she gives women is to fight period-induced cravings for fried food and chocolate—since processed foods may only exacerbate IBS—and instead choose foods found in a Mediterranean diet. "It's kind of going back to that mind-gut connection and working on how we internalize stress," she says.

Ultimately, the key to maintaining optimal gut health is far too complex to sell in a single jar or mix into a protein shake, and any long-lasting results will take more than a few days to achieve. "Every six to eight weeks, your gut microbiome starts to turn over and change," Johnson says. She estimates that if people with gut issues adhere to a balanced diet, exercise regularly, keep their stress levels low and get enough sleep, they would likely feel a difference within four to eight weeks. Of course, a lifestyle revamp is easier said than done, so experiment with one facet of your life at a time. The journey to a healthier gut isn't always easy or straightforward, but for many people, it's worth it. □