Cultivating a healthy GI tract

Your belly can play a major role in staying healthy and happy

It's important to understand why the gut is such a marvel at defending and protecting your body. The evidence is growing that there may be a link between the health of the gut and resistance to many diseases (including several forms of cancer), how you process food, and how alert and energetic you are.[1,2]

The vastness of your gut's defense team

There are about one hundred trillion microbes in your GI tract — about 95% of all the bacteria and microorganisms in your body.[3] These tiny beneficial bacteria can act together as a physical barrier protecting your gut. They can also join together against pathogens (anything that causes a disease, like a virus or bad bacteria).

Scientists believe that gut microbes are responsible for many functions that are involved in immunity, the absorption of nutrients, and metabolising energy.[4]

The healthy diversity of gut flora

Gut flora is one of the terms used to describe the complex community of microorganisms that live in your GI tract.[4] Another term is gut microbiota.[4] It isn't just the volume of microbes that add up to a strong defense, it's the incredible diversity of that gut flora.[4] Collectively, this ecosystem is called "the gut microbiome."[4]

When the rich diversity of this ecosystem is diminished or disrupted, scientists believe that conditions like type 2 diabetes, obesity, and inflammatory bowel disease can be the result.[5,6]

Take the Gutsy Challenge to cultivate a healthier GI tract

The Gutsy Challenge is designed to help you make healthier lifestyle changes in four areas over four weeks. Here are some examples of some of the things you can try in each category, to help preserve and strengthen the vastness and diversity of your gut's ecosystem.

Week 1: Diet	Have active yoghurt as dessert
Week 2: Sleep	Limit electronic screen time an hour before bed
Week 3: Physical Activity	Ask a friend to join you for a workout
Week 4: Stress	Practice gratitude by writing down 3 good things that happened today

It's important to set realistic goals for yourself as you adopt new healthy behaviours. For example, if you don't have a regular exercise routine, start with a moderate effort. Perhaps start with a brisk 15-minute walk three times a week, and try working up to 40 minutes. Or do two or three segments of 10 to 15 minutes per day. Remember, your cardiovascular health can also benefit from the same lifestyle changes.

Remember to consult with your doctor before starting an exercise program. If you need help and encouragement, ask your family and friends for their support.

1. Institute of Medicine, 'The Human Microbiome, Diet, and Health: Influence of the Microbiome on the Metabolism of Diet and Dietary Components', 2013
2. International Journal of Molecular Sciences, 'Impacts of Gut Bacteria on Human Health and Diseases', April 2015
3. American Society for Microbiology, 'Humans Have Ten Times More Bacteria Than Human Cells: How Do Microbial Communities Affect Human Health?', June 2008
4. Gail Hecht, MD, MD, MS, AGAF, 'The Power of the Microbiome', March 2013
5. Genome Medicine, 'Impact of the gut microbiota on inflammation, obesity, and metabolic disease', April 2016
6. World Journal of Gastroenterology, 'Role of the Gut Microbiota in Inflammatory Bowel Disease Pathogenesis: What Have We Learnt in the Past 10 Years?' February 2014

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