

# How to prepare and protect your gut health over Christmas and the silly season

December 21 2020, by Claus T. Christophersen

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It's that time of year again, with Christmas parties, end-of-year get-togethers and holiday catch-ups on the horizon for many of us—all

COVID-safe, of course. All that party food and takeaway, however, can have consequences for your gut health.

Gut health matters. Your gut is a crucial part your immune system. In fact, [70%](#) of your entire [immune system](#) sits around your gut, and an important part of that is what's known as the gut-associated lymphoid tissue (GALT), which houses a host of immune cells in your gut.

Good gut health means looking after your gut microbiome—the bacteria, fungi, viruses and tiny organisms that live inside you and help break down your food—but also the cells and function of your gastrointestinal system.

We know gut health can affect mood, thanks to what's known as the gut-brain axis. But there's also a [gut-lung axis](#) and a [gut-liver](#) axis, meaning what happens in your gut can affect your respiratory system or liver, too.

Here's what you can do to bolster your gut microbiome in the coming weeks and months.

## **How do silly season indulgences affect our gut health?**

You can change your gut microbiome within a couple of days by [changing your diet](#). And over a longer period of time, such as the Christmas-New Year season, your diet pattern can change significantly, often without you really noticing.

That means we may be changing the organisms that make up our microbiome during this time. Whatever you put in will favour certain bacteria in your microbiome over others.

We know fatty, sugary foods promote bacteria that are not as beneficial for gut health. And if you indulge over days or weeks, you are pushing

your microbiome towards an imbalance.

## **Is there anything I can do to prepare my gut health for the coming onslaught?**

Yes! If your gut is healthy to begin with, it will take more to knock it out of whack. Prepare yourself now by making choices that feed the beneficial organisms in your [gut microbiome](#) and enhance gut health.

That means:

- Eating [prebiotic foods](#) such as jerusalem artichokes, garlic, onions and a variety of grains and inulin-enhanced yogurts (inulin is a prebiotic carbohydrate shown to have broad benefits to gut health)
- eating [resistant starches](#), which are starches that pass undigested through the small intestine and feed the bacteria in the large intestine. That includes grainy wholemeal bread, legumes such as beans and lentils, firm bananas, starchy vegetables like potatoes and some pasta and rice. The trick to increasing resistant starches in potato, pasta and rice is to cook them but [eat](#) them [cold](#). So consider serving a cold potato or pasta salad over Christmas
- Choosing fresh, unprocessed fruits and vegetables
- Steering clear of added sugar where possible. Excessive amounts of added sugar (or fruit sugar from high consumption of fruit) flows quickly to the large intestine, where it gets gobbled up by bacteria. That can cause higher gas production, diarrhea and potentially upset the balance of the microbiome
- Remembering that if you increase the amount of fiber in your diet (or via a supplement), you'll need to drink more water—or you can get constipated.

For inspiration on how to increase resistant starch in your diet for improved gut health, you might consider checking out a [cookbook](#) I coauthored (all proceeds fund research and I have no personal interest).

## What can I do to limit the damage?

If Christmas and New Year means a higher intake of red meat or processed meat for you, remember some studies have shown that diets higher red meat can introduce DNA damage in the colon, which makes you [more susceptible to colorectal cancer](#).

The good news is other [research](#) suggests if you include a certain amount of resistant starch in a higher red meat diet, you can reduce or even eliminate that damage. So consider a helping of cold potato salad along with a steak or sausage from the barbie.

Don't forget to exercise over your Christmas break. Even going for a brisk walk can get things moving and keep your bowel movements regular, which helps improve your gut health.

Have a look at the [Australian Guide to Healthy Eating](#) and remember what foods are in the "sometimes" category. Try to keep track of whether you really are only having these foods "sometimes" or if you have slipped into a habit of having them much more frequently.

The best and easiest way to check your gut health is to use the Bristol stool chart. If you're hitting around a 4, you should be good.

Remember, there are no quick fixes. Your gut health is like a garden or an ecosystem. If you want the good plants to grow, you need to tend to them—otherwise, the weeds can take over.

I know you're probably sick of hearing the basics—eat fruits and

vegetables, exercise and don't make the treats too frequent—but the fact is good gut health is hard won and easily lost. It's worth putting in the effort.

A preventative mindset helps. If you do the right thing most of the time and indulge just now and then, your gut health will be OK in the end.

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