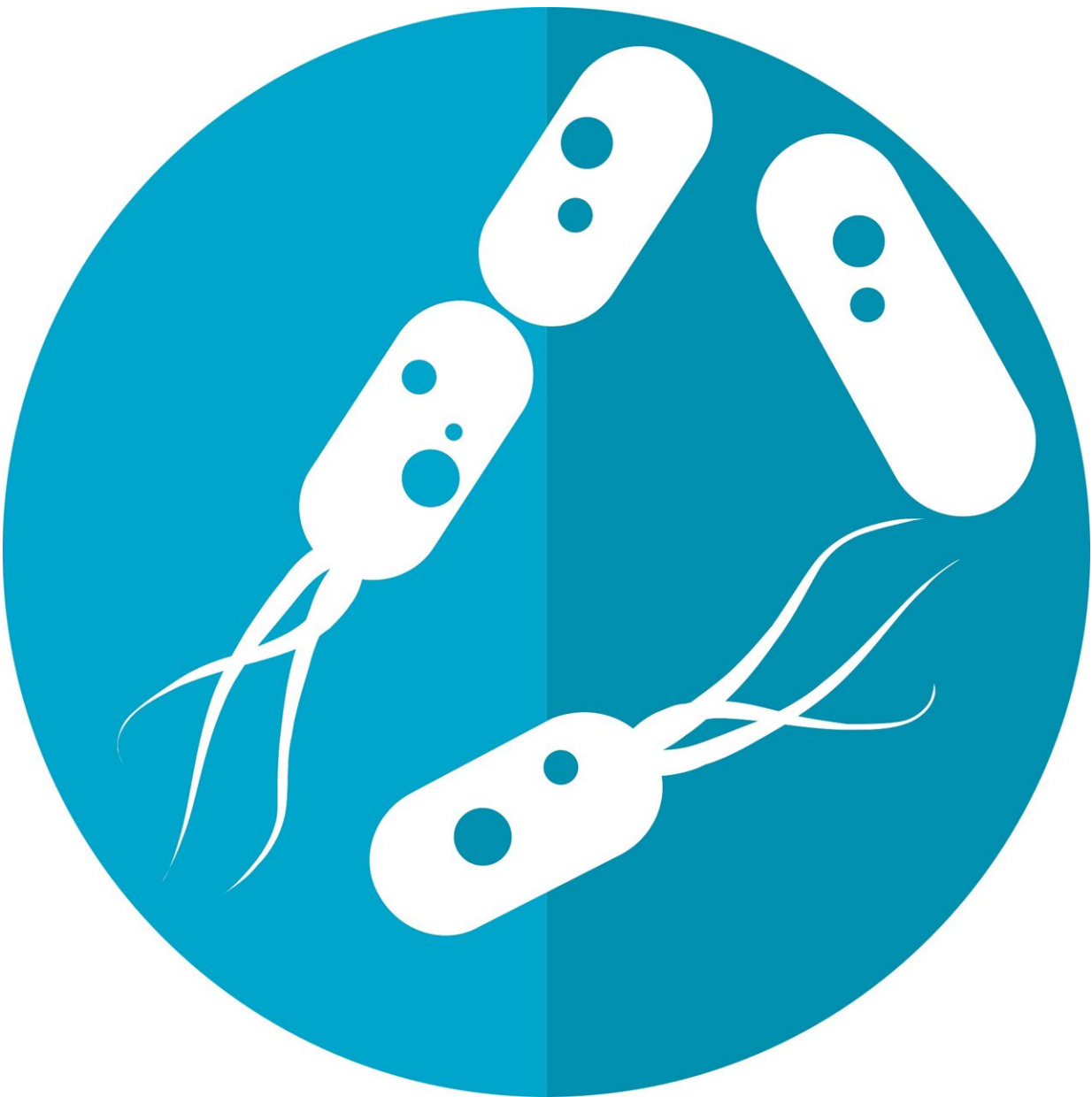


How to maintain a healthy gut microbiome in 2024

January 9 2024, by Rosie Young, Mariam Gamal El-Din and Yang Yue



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We all know by now that the pillars of a healthy lifestyle are regular exercise, eating enough fruit and vegetables, a good night's sleep and staying hydrated. All of these things also support the gut microbiome—all the microbes that live in your digestive system—but there are some extras to consider if you want to optimize your gut health.

It's widely accepted among those of us who study the [gut microbiome](#) that a [healthy gut](#) is one that contains a diverse range of microbes and has an effective gut barrier (the lining between your intestine and bloodstream).

Let's look at diet first. It probably has the biggest influence on your gut health. Diets high in fiber, [unsaturated fatty acids](#) (found in fish and nuts), and polyphenols (chemicals found in plants) will [promote a healthy gut](#), while those high in saturated fats, additives (such as "E numbers") and sugar can harm gut health. So avoid consuming a lot of ultra-processed foods.

Emulsifiers, a common additive in ultra-processed foods, have been found to cause [intestinal inflammation and a leaky gut](#). The most common ones to look out for on packaging are lecithin, guar or xanthan gum, and mono- or diglycerides.

These additives are also common in [protein supplements](#), whose popularity has steadily been increasing since the early 2000s, especially among gym goers looking to bulk up.

Prebiotics and probiotics

It would be unreasonable and unrealistic to tell you to avoid foods with additives, but trying to limit consumption, while increasing your consumption of prebiotic and probiotic foods, could help protect your gut.

Dietary fiber is a good example of a prebiotic, which is defined as a non-digestible [food](#) ingredient that can stimulate the growth of good bacteria [in the colon](#). As the main food source of your gut microbes, it is important to consume enough if you want your microbiome to flourish. Government guidelines suggest around 30g of fiber a day for adults and 15–25g for children.

Most prebiotics come from plant foods, so getting a high diversity of plant products in your diet will keep your gut healthy. The latest recommendation is to include 30 [plant species](#) in your [diet per week](#). This may sound hard to achieve but bear in mind that both good-quality coffee and dark chocolate count.

Probiotics, the live bacteria and yeasts themselves, can be easily consumed through fermented [food products](#), drinks or supplements. Choosing a high-quality probiotic is important. While there is an increasing amount on the market in supplement, powder and tablet form, they can be expensive. Fermented foods can be just as effective, but a whole lot cheaper.

Yogurts, cheese, sauerkraut, kimchi and fermented soy products, such as tempeh and miso, are examples of fermented foods that not only support the healthy balance of your gut bacteria but provide a good source of fibers, vitamins and [other nutrients](#).

To get the most benefit from these products, look for those in the fridge section labeled as containing "live cultures" or "live bacteria," with minimal ingredients and no heating or pasteurization processing.

Aside from what you eat, how often you eat could also affect your gut health. Fasting can allow repair of the gut lining and [reduce inflammation](#).

Medication and the microbiome

Medications can directly and indirectly affect our gut health. You may have heard that antibiotics are bad for your gut microbiome, especially those which are "[broad spectrum](#)" and will kill off not only harmful bacteria but beneficial ones too. This can be associated with [gastrointestinal problems and decreased immunity](#), especially after prolonged use.

Of course, doctors do not prescribe antibiotics lightly, so it is important to take them as instructed. If you are concerned, discuss the potential effects on your gut health with your GP.

Although you may not have much say over which medications you take, there are a few strategies to support your gut during and after medication.

Staying healthy by prioritizing good sleep and managing [stress levels](#) is also important, but increasing your intake of both [prebiotics](#) and [probiotics](#) at this time may [lessen the blow](#) of medication on your microbiome.

It is always recommended you check with your doctor before introducing a probiotic supplement in the rare case that it may not be suitable alongside the treatment.

Microbiome research is continuously shedding new light on the intricate connections between the microbes that live in our gut and our well-being. So watch this space. In the meantime, follow the above advice—it

will help you maintain a healthy gut [microbiome](#) in 2024 and beyond.

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