GUT HEALTH TUNE-UP

STRATEGIES TO GET LEAN AND REGULAR IN THE NEW YEAR

A WEALTH OF NEW RESEARCH SHOWS THAT OUR OVERALL HEALTH STARTS—OR STALLS OUT—IN THE GUT. Researchers believe the key is the gut microbiome, the trillion or so bacteria that inhabit the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and help regulate everything from metabolism to immunity to mood. In the spirit of the New Year, why not consider a tune-up for your “digestive engine”? You’ll feel better, likely gain energy, reduce risks for some diseases, and probably even drop a few pounds.

YOUR MICROBIOME, YOUR METABOLISM

“There are 10 times more bacteria in our digestive system than cells in our bodies, and 99 percent of our DNA is in these bacteria,” says Liz Lipski, PhD, director of nutrition programs at Maryland University of Integrative Health and author of Digestive Wellness. “The gut microbiome really runs your metabolism. If it’s imbalanced—which is easy to do—your metabolism won’t work the right way.” This is especially true for people with “thrifty genes,” she says. “Their systems use every single calorie, so it’s easy for them to gain weight.”

Established during the first two years of life, the gut microbiome is shaped by diet, antibiotic use, stress, and other environmental factors. “We used to believe that once established, we couldn’t change it,” Lipski says. The good news: the latest research indicates that specific dietary changes can re-establish a healthier bacterial balance.

Even if you consider yourself a healthful eater, some seemingly benign habits can compromise your digestive efficiency over time. Read on to discover a handful of pitfalls that may be messing with your digestive and weight-loss mojo, along with expert-approved strategies to achieve belly bliss.
1. **Eating a Low-Fiber Diet**

“The foods you eat consistently determine the types of bacteria in your gut. Most people eat too many processed foods,” says Robynne Chutkan, MD, founder of the Digestive Center for Women in Chevy Chase, Md., and author of Gutbliss. The average American gets less than half the fiber we did 150 years ago, says Lipski.

**The Fix: Get More Fiber.** *(It’s the Original Prebiotic!)*

Eating a variety of fiber-rich plant foods helps fuel “good” bacteria strains. “Seventy percent of the immune system is in your gut,” explains herbalist Christopher Hobbs, PhD, Lac, co-author of Grow It, Heal It: Natural and Effective Herbal Remedies from Your Garden or Window sill. “A healthy balance of beneficial bacteria protects against pathogenic bacteria and regulates immune response, so your body doesn’t overreact to certain foods.”

In a study published in 2010, researchers compared the gut microbes of young children in Europe to those of kids in the West African country of Burkina Faso. There were lots of protective bacteria associated with cellulose breakdown in the guts of the African kids eating a traditional diet rich in high-fiber tubers. The European kids lacked the protective bugs.

A study published in the Journal Science in 2011 showed that switching to a high-fiber diet can change gut bacteria within 24 hours. For lasting benefits, Lipski notes, people need to change their diets over the long term.

Which high-fiber foods most efficiently foster good bacteria? Research points to fruits, vegetables, and grains that contain digestion-resistant starches such as inulin and FOS (fructo-oligosaccharides). These include root vegetables (such as beets, turnips, and rutabagas), sweet potatoes, garlic, onions, leeks, Jerusalem artichokes, asparagus, apples, oats, barley, jicama root, broccoli, and cauliflower, says Lipski. “The prebiotic fibers [in root vegetables] seem to have the most effect.”

2. **Overlooking Food Sensitivities**

“Many of us lose our ability to digest dairy products as we age,” says Chutkan. “More than half the population has some degree of lactose intolerance.” Lactose sensitivity “is a good example of how the body adjusts to a changing diet,” she continues. “Many of us lose our ability to digest dairy products as we age,” says Chutkan. “More than half the population has some degree of lactose intolerance.” Lactose sensitivity “is a good example of how the body adjusts to a changing diet,” she continues. “It’s easier than you think to cut back on—or even cut out—added sugars, says Hobbs. “Even type-A people overeat when they’re stressed.” Chutkan reminds clients that the body’s biggest stress response is overreacting to certain foods.”

In a study published in the journal Science in 2010, researchers compared the gut microbes of young kids who moved from Burkina Faso to the United States and kids born and raised in the U.S. Switching to a Western diet was associated with cellulose breakdown in the guts of the African kids eating a traditional diet rich in high-fiber tubers. The European kids lacked the protective bugs.

**The Fix: Eat More Mini-Meals and Head Off Stress.**

Try eating five nutrient-dense mini-meals throughout the day to keep blood sugar steady and ease digestion. If you do eat a larger meal, Chutkan recommends doing it earlier in the day: if you plan to eat out, make it breakfast or lunch rather than dinner, she advises.

Many people overeat because they’re bored or stressed, says Hobbs. To combat emotional eating, he recommends proven stress relievers such as taking a walk outside and deeply breathing the fresh air. “Walking and other physical activity helps reset insulin binding and reception, leading to better insulin production,” he says. His other favorite strategies: Meditate daily, it promotes calm and emotional balance. Cultivate activities you’re passionate about, he’ll absorb your attention. Don’t procrastinate, it starts a cycle of anxiety. Work on good communication, you’ll minimize relationship stress.

3. **Indulging Your Sweet Tooth**

There is growing awareness of the negative health effects of the average American’s 135-pound-a-year refined sugar habit, from obesity and diabetes to the chronic, low-grade inflammation that’s linked to many major diseases. Even so, it’s easy to have a blind spot when it comes to your own sweet tooth. Excessive sugar consumption causes bacterial imbalance in the gut, such as an overgrowth of candida yeast, says Chutkan. Symptoms can include acne, vaginal discharge, fatigue, and trouble concentrating.

When it comes to women’s hormones, excess sugar is particularly problematic, says Lipski. “It changes the way hormones work in the body: the pancreas works overtime releasing insulin to try to get the sugar out of the bloodstream, which can lead to insulin resistance and hypertensive tendencies.”

**The Fix: Get Smart About Sweeteners.**

It’s easier than you think to cut back on—or even cut out—added sugars, says Hobbs. “The stimulation in the brain goes away after about a week; it resets to its natural level rather than an artificially stimulated level,” he notes. If you’re not ready to swear off the sweet stuff altogether, eating naturally sweet foods, such as fresh and dried fruits, can ease the transition. Unlike refined sugar, fruit offers nutrients and fiber.

Choose whole-leaf stevia over artificial sweeteners, which may throw off your metabolism and increase diabetes risk, according to initial research on people who drink diet soda. “Stevia is an herb with chemicals in it called steviolides. They taste very sweet but do not metabolize like sugar,” Hobbs says. “Stevia has beneficial effects on insulin binding and metabolism, helping to normalize blood sugar levels.”

Grow a stevia plant indoors and chew on a sweet-tasting fresh leaf to help control cravings, he suggests.

4. **Problem Overeating, Especially at Night**

“Although food quality is important, so is quantity, as well as when you eat,” says Hobbs. “Even type-A people overeat when they’re stressed.” Chutkan reminds clients that the stomach is small: the size of a closed fist. Overfilling it—especially with hard-to-digest rich or fried foods—and then lying down to sleep can cause delayed emptying of the stomach and lead to heartburn, bloating, and abdominal pain.

Also keep in mind that metabolism naturally slows as we age, says Chutkan. “We need to make a gradual shift toward smaller portions.” Skipping meals, however, is a no-no, she adds. “It inevitably leads to overeating later in the day.”

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5. **Problems Taking Certain Medications**

“People—and doctors—have a blind spot when it comes to NSAIDs and acid-suppressing drugs, both of which upset the GI tract’s delicate balance,” says Chutkan. Taken regularly, aspirin and NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen) can damage the GI tract lining and stress the liver.

“Proton-pump inhibitors block stomach acid very effectively, but we have stomach
Taking a round of antibiotics upsets the bacterial balance in the gut. Not adequately re-establishing good bacteria can have lingering effects.

**The Fix**  **Talk to Your Doctor About Fine-Tuning Your Meds.**

Make a list of all of the prescriptions or over-the-counter drugs you take, and discuss with your health care provider whether any of them might be negatively affecting your digestive health. If so, discuss safe ways to try to reduce their use over time.

In some cases, lifestyle changes or alternative remedies can help. For instance, drinking Swedish or Angostura bitters mixed into a small glass of seltzer can help prime the digestive system before meals and head off heartburn, says New Mexico–based Tieraona Low Dog, MD. To relieve chronic pain, massage therapy, acupuncture, and anti-inflammatory supplements such as devil’s claw, turmeric, and ginger are all backed by initial research. If you take NSAIDs, a milk thistle supplement can help support your liver’s detoxification process, says Hobbs. And new research about the “gut-brain” shows gut bacteria affect brain function, and that consuming probiotics may help relieve anxiety and depression. Regular exercise, meditation, and omega-3 supplements also can improve symptoms, researchers say.

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