

# GO WITH YOUR GUT

Why the inner workings of the belly are a major key to overall health.

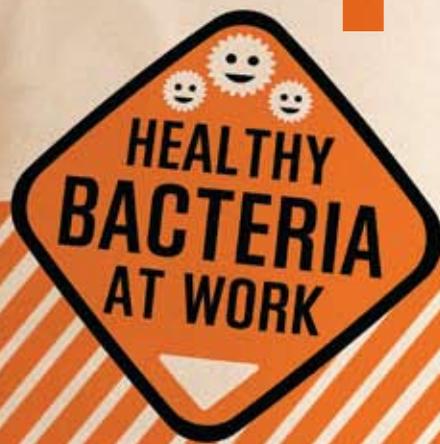
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**Y**ou probably remember enough of your biology lessons from school to know that your body is made up of cells - somewhere in the 60 to 100 trillion range for adults.

But you may not know that your body contains ten times more bacteria than it does cells. And that's a lot of bacteria. Probably 500 to 1,000 different types at any one time, and about 100 trillion in total numbers on and inside your body.

But before you panic and begin compulsively washing your hands, be assured that this is "likely no accident," according to Dr. Gerard Mullin, director of integrative GI nutrition services at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, and co-author of "The Inside Tract: Your Good Gut Guide to Great Digestive Health" (Rodale, 2011). "Our guts [the stomach and intestines] break down food, and those breakdown products not only give us energy and make up our bodies, they feed the bacteria within us," Mullin explains.

And why would we want to feed them? Turns out, these little guys perform functions essential to our health. Experts





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say they help develop and maintain our immune system; they interact with our brains to affect mood and behavior; they produce B vitamins to give us energy; they assist in regulating our gastrointestinal motility, which is how food moves through our digestive system; and they affect our appetites and metabolism, which means they may help determine how heavy we are.

Because of this, when our bacteria (known collectively as a microbiome) are out of whack, we may suffer from irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, ulcers, obesity, heartburn and more. But, good news! If a troubled gut causes these symptoms, improving the health of your gut can help reduce them and improve overall health.

### **WHAT MAKES A HEALTHY (AND UNHEALTHY) GUT?**

The bacterial colony that flourishes in your gut is started at birth, literally. "We get healthy bacteria as we're born, in the birth canal," explains Monica Montag, a board-certified holistic nutritionist and owner of BeWell Associates, a nutrition practice in State College, Pa. "So immediately that's a problem for C-section babies."

Babies who don't pass through the birth canal must pick up the bacteria they need later, and this means their gut population may struggle from the start. "Those born by C-section are more prone to asthma, allergies and autoimmune disease, in part because they lack the full spectrum of protective bacteria," explains Dr. Victor S. Sierpina, director of the medical student education program at University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, and co-author of "The Healthy Gut Workbook" (New Harbinger Publications, 2010).

Antibiotics, particularly in children, can also cause problems. Yes, these drugs wipe out the bacteria making us sick, but they also decimate the population of good bacteria that lives inside us. In adults, antibiotics, anti-inflammatory and other types of drugs, infections of the gut (an overgrowth of bad bacteria), chronic stress and a high fat/high sugar diet are among the factors likely to affect gut health, Sierpina says.

So what keeps a gut healthy? If you start life with a good colony, you should be able to maintain it by eating fruits and vegetables, as the indigestible fiber in produce feeds gut bacteria, Montag explains. Mullin adds that artichokes, asparagus, leeks, and

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onions are particularly good veggie choices.

Gut flora also especially like fermented foods such as miso, kimchi (a Korean fermented cabbage), yogurt, kefir (a fermented dairy product), sauerkraut, tempeh (a fermented soy product) and kombucha (a fermented tea drink—see sidebar for details). These foods actually contain good bacteria, known as probiotics, so eating them helps populate our gut with the bacteria we need, Mullin explains.

### WHAT IF YOUR GUT NEEDS TO BE HEALTHIER?

If you're suffering from gastrointestinal (or other) ailments, or you've realized your diet may not be as bacteria-friendly as it could be, there are a variety of ways to improve the health of your gut:

- If you've recently given your child an antibiotic, or taken one yourself, help gut flora recover with some extra helpings of probiotic foods, or a probiotic supplement. Montag suggests choosing a supplement from the refrigerated section of a health food store and keeping it refrigerated at home.

- Adjust your diet to include more of the gut-friendly foods mentioned previously, and consider removing gluten and/or dairy from your diet to see if your symptoms improve. (Both are common allergens.) Montag also notes that refined carbs and sugar can feed the wrong kinds of bacteria in your gut.

- Drink lots of water, and ingest alcohol and caffeine in moderation, Montag adds.

- If you have an established gastrointestinal condition (IBS, chronic heartburn, Crohn's disease, etc.) you should be under the care of a medical professional, Mullin says. "But there are things you can try to help yourself. You can't live in the doctor's office. People are in control of the way they eat, rest, sleep and deal with stress, and all of those mitigate disease, the microbiome and immunity as well." Mullin's book, "The Inside Tract," includes helpful guides and suggestions for self-healing based on the severity of current symptoms, and Sierpina's "The Healthy Gut Workbook" also offers a practical approach to improving your gut.

- Consider seeing a nutritionist for additional information and insights into how your diet, gut health and gastrointestinal (and other) symptoms may be related, and how you can help them improve. Visit the American Nutrition Association's website ([americannutritionassociation.org](http://americannutritionassociation.org)) to find a practitioner near you.

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## THE RISE OF KOMBUCHA

It starts out looking like a pancake, but it's actually a complex colony of yeast and bacteria. And when it's fed with organic black tea and sugar, "it transforms the resulting liquid into a refreshingly sweet and sour, lightly sparkling beverage with a fruity fragrance," Thomas L. Stone, M.D., explains in the American Nutrition Association's Nutrition Digest. This beverage is known as kombucha, and because the process of creating it involves fermentation (similar to making vinegar), it can offer a delicious boost to the good bacteria in your gut.

Kombucha contains B vitamins and amino acids, and has been said to be everything from a 'fountain of youth' elixir to a hair thickener and color restorer to a treatment for chronic fatigue, hemorrhoids and cancer. But the scientific data is a little light on those claims. However, "some existing studies do suggest potential health benefits," Stone notes.

It's "generally a useful food for good health unless you have an allergy [to fermented foods] or an overgrowth of yeast in your system," says nutritionist Monica Montag. "If you use it and feel better, assume it's good. If you don't feel better, stop and try a regular probiotic," she suggests.

It's possible to order a "pancake" and culture your own kombucha at home - just use common sense: Work with clean hands and clean utensils, and if it smells really bad or turns a strange color, throw it out, Stone says. However, it may be easier to sample kombucha by purchasing a prepared product at Whole Foods or a health food store, adds Dr. Gerard Mullin.

But wherever you get your kombucha, drink it in moderation. Stone suggests four ounces two or three times a day to be the maximum amount an adult should ingest. Any substance, in excess, can be harmful, he cautions. But his ultimate conclusion? "In my opinion, Kombucha is a delightful, nutritious, inexpensive, and probably helpful beverage for many people."