

GUT INSTINCT

Second only to the common cold, digestive problems are one of the main reasons people in Ireland visit their healthcare practitioner.

Symptoms of an unhealthy digestive system can range from transient mild upset to chronic debilitating conditions. In Ireland, IBS is the most common problem associated with the digestive system and affects as many as one in five of our population. It is most prevalent in people in their twenties and thirties and affects more women than men. Not everybody experiences IBS in the same way. For some people irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a mild annoyance, while in others it can have a tremendously debilitating effect. IBS is characterised by abdominal pain, bloating and changes in bowel function, and ranks as high as the common cold in terms of people needing days off work to cope with it. Whilst IBS is a chronic condition, certain medications, stress and a diet high in sugar or processed foods, can alter the bacterial balance in the digestive system compromising our gut health, which can have far-reaching effects on our overall health.

Digestive health, commonly referred to as gut health, has become a hot topic in recent times. Over the last two decades, a growing body of research has emerged indicating that a healthy gut is critical to our overall health. Conversely, an unhealthy gut can underpin and contribute to a wide range of conditions such as obesity, hormone imbalances, skin health, insomnia, autoimmune conditions and chronic fatigue. Interestingly, studies have even shown a link between brain health and gut health suggesting

that if your gut isn't functioning properly your brain probably isn't functioning optimally either.

The gut is literally the engine room of the body. Also known as the gastrointestinal tract, the gut is a nine metre tube which includes the mouth, stomach, small and large intestine – if it were spread out flat, it would cover an entire tennis court! This enormous series of hollow organs is largely responsible for the critical functions of the body's digestive and immune systems and hosts trillions of both beneficial and potentially unbeneficial bacteria known as the microbiome. Each of us has a unique microbiome, which is influenced by many factors from birth. The careful balance and diversity of bacteria in an individual's microbiome has an important influence on our overall health, with the capability of affecting our body's vitamin and mineral absorbency, hormone regulation, digestion, vitamin production and ability to eliminate toxins.

The modern diet has changed dramatically over the last 100 years with a marked increase in foods that are highly processed, high in sugar and fat and much lower in fibre. This industrialised diet has substantially altered our gut bacteria and reduced its diversity, a key element in robust health. Microbes play a central role in determining our health destiny. Keeping this in mind supporting the health and diversity of your gut bacteria is one of the most important things you can do to get and stay healthy, for life.

Prebiotics are the food that good bacteria thrive on and are

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useful in helping make sure that the levels of the beneficial bacteria stay high. They can often help with either constipation or diarrhoea. Prebiotics have also been shown to be helpful with IBS and particularly with bloating and flatulence. Including good levels of prebiotics in our diet nurtures beneficial bacteria and supports a healthy microbiome which in turn positively supports our mood, hormone balance, immunity and brain function.

WHAT'S ON THE MICROBIOME MENU?

Jerusalem artichokes

High in the prebiotic inulin, an insoluble fibre which travels through our bodies from the small to large intestine where it ferments feeding the healthy micro-flora. Other good sources of inulin include asparagus, leeks, onions and bananas.

Bananas

A rich source of fructooligosaccharides, a prebiotic that feeds friendly bacteria in the digestive system, bananas restore health of the bacterial community and may reduce inflammation due to high levels of potassium and magnesium.

Naturally fermented plant-based foods

Fermented foods like tempeh, miso, sauerkraut and kefir are all on trend for a reason. They provide beneficial live organisms to inoculate your gut and crowd out the unhealthy bacteria.



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Cruciferous Vegetables

Vegetables like broccoli, kale, cabbage, and cauliflower have an anti-inflammatory effect in the gut as they contain sulphur-containing metabolites, known as glucosinolates, which when digested by gut bacteria release substances that reduce inflammation. They also act as defenders and latch onto carcinogenic intruders in the colon to reduce the risk of bladder, breast, colon, liver, lung and stomach cancer.

Beans and Pulses

Legumes will help release short-chain fatty acids (SCFA) that strengthen your intestine cells, improve absorption of micronutrients, and help with weight loss.

Chickpeas, lentils and beans all provide much-needed fodder for the good gut bugs, which in turn balances your immune system. Calorie for calorie, beans offer a nutrient dense bang for your buck. Packed with fibre, protein, folate, and B vitamins, they can play a key role in influencing effective hormone excretion and assist in regulating a healthy gut and a healthy brain.

NOTE:

When you first start increasing your prebiotic intake, you can actually have an increase in flatulence and think that the prebiotic is making the symptom worse. But bear with it for around two weeks because once the levels of the good bacteria strains have increased, the flatulence will subside. The increased flatulence is a sign the prebiotic is working.