

Let's Talk...

**LET'S
TALK
gUTS**

Gut Bacteria, Prebiotics and Probiotics

Your gut is home to trillions of tiny, microscopic organisms - mostly bacteria - that play a massive role in keeping you healthy. You can't see them, but they're there. Sounds like a sci-fi film, right?

An introduction to gut bacteria, prebiotics and probiotics

Together, the bustling community inside your gut is known as your gut microbiota or microbiome. It works hard behind the scenes to support your digestion, immune system, and even your mood. Yet, with so much talk out there about gut health, it can be tough to separate fact from fiction.

The recommended approach to supporting your gut bacteria involves eating a varied, plant-rich diet to naturally feed your microbes, rather than relying on expensive supplements.

Our gut bacteria are a vital part of our health, but introducing changes to support them, like adding prebiotic foods or choosing a probiotic, needs to be done with the right information. Flooding your digestive system with new products all at once can sometimes trigger temporary digestive symptoms such as gas or bloating.



Please note, this information is intended to provide general health and lifestyle guidance only. If you live with a digestive condition and need tailored information and support about healthy eating, please speak to your healthcare team or a gastroenterology dietitian.

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What are the gut bacteria and why do they matter?

Your large bowel contains a thriving community of microbes. While some can be harmful in large amounts, the vast majority are incredibly friendly and beneficial. Think of your gut microbiota as an internal ecosystem. These friendly bacteria help break down parts of your food that your body can't manage on its own, like certain complex carbohydrates and dietary fibres. When they feed on these fibres, they produce essential nutrients. These include short-chain fatty acids, which nourish the cells lining your bowel, keep your immune system strong, and prevent harmful bacteria from taking over. A diverse, well-fed microbiome is key to a resilient digestive system.

What are prebiotics and probiotics and why do they matter?

While your gut bacteria work hard for you, they need the right environment and support to thrive. This is where prebiotics and probiotics come into play. They matter because they are the tools we can use to actively shape, feed and strengthen our inner ecosystem.

Prebiotics are the food for your bacteria

These are special, non-digestible plant fibres. Humans cannot digest prebiotics, so they travel down to your large bowel completely intact. Once there, your beneficial gut bacteria eagerly feast on them. Feeding your existing good bacteria with prebiotics allows them to grow, multiply and do their jobs more efficiently.

Probiotics are live, friendly microbes

These are live bacteria or yeasts that you can take into your gut through fermented foods or dietary supplements. When you consume them in adequate amounts, they act like a temporary workforce, passing through your digestive system to support your native bacteria, help keep harmful microbes in check and restore balance if your system has been disrupted. This might have been after a stomach bug or a course of antibiotics.



Good to know: When you introduce more prebiotic foods or live cultures into your diet, it is completely normal to notice a slight increase in wind, changes to your poo, or mild bloating for the first few days. This is a sign that your gut bacteria are busy adjusting and fermenting their new food. It's important to discuss any persistent changes with your doctor.

Five top tips for supporting your gut bacteria:

1. Eat a wide variety of plants

The single best way to encourage a diverse and healthy microbiome is to eat a broad range of plant foods. Aim to include different fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, beans, pulses, nuts and seeds in your weekly meals. Different microbes prefer different foods, so variety on your plate means a happier, more diverse gut.

2. Fill up on natural prebiotics

You don't need special powders to get prebiotics. They are naturally packed into everyday foods like onions, garlic, leeks, asparagus, artichokes, bananas, oats and chicory root. Adding these ingredients to your cooking gives your friendly bacteria the fuel that they love.

3. Fill up on natural probiotics

You can get natural probiotics by incorporating fermented foods into your diet. Foods like live bio-yoghurt, kefir (a fermented, milk drink), sauerkraut (fermented cabbage), kimchi and kombucha contain live bacteria cultures that help support your digestive ecosystem. Check these products are suitable for a healthy diet and don't contain too much salt.

4. Be savvy with probiotic supplements

If you choose to take a probiotic supplement, pick one that has scientific evidence backing it for your specific need. Because different strains of bacteria do completely different jobs, a product that helps one symptom might not help another. Give a new prebiotic a try for at least four weeks and if you don't notice a benefit by then, it's likely not the right strain for you.

5. Look after your lifestyle

Your gut bacteria are highly sensitive to your environment. Managing stress through relaxing activities, getting plenty of regular sleep and keeping physically active all have a surprisingly positive effect on the balance and health of your microbiome.



Want to learn more?

We provide information and support on more than 40 digestive conditions and symptoms, as well as health and lifestyle. Go to gutscharity.org.uk/information to discover more.

