

War ^{the} within

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Helping
your gut
bacteria
fight the
good fight

You probably don't think much about your digestive system until a dreaded ailment or ill-advised meal has suddenly put it in distress. But at every moment, even while you're peacefully sleeping, a dramatic war is being waged inside your belly.

More than just an empty conduit for food, the gut contains about 100 trillion bacteria. It may sound like the basis of a dreadful plague, but these bacteria aren't all bad. The beneficial ones help keep the number of harmful ones in check, and they help metabolize nutrients and medications as they pass through your body. They also keep your colon clean, break up gas bubbles, and help your immune system fight harmful pathogens that would otherwise make you sick.

When these good bacteria become outnumbered or overpowered, you may begin to notice really uncomfortable symptoms: bloating, cramping, diarrhea and nausea. If you've ever had a bout of diarrhea after taking antibiotics for an infection, you have experienced this. While killing the bacteria they were prescribed to get rid of, those antibiotics were also doing a number on the helpful bacteria in your gut.

Maintaining a healthy balance of bacteria in your gut doesn't just keep those nasty symptoms at bay. Some research suggests it can also help you maintain a healthy weight, keep cholesterol in balance, keep your blood sugar in check, and even improve your mental health.

So how do you make sure to have plenty of helpful bacteria in there?

The Pros of Probiotics

One way to boost your good bacteria is to simply eat more of them. Probiotics are foods or supplements that contain these live microorganisms, which take up residence in your belly and begin their important work right away.

The most common example is yogurt, which is made by fermenting milk with a variety of bacteria. Other fermented, probiotic-rich foods include sauerkraut, kombucha and kimchi.

If that menu doesn't appeal to you, there are probiotic supplements on the market so you can get the goods in one gulp. Dozens of different varieties are commercially available, and while they're all formulated to thrive in the stomach's acidic environment, no two are truly alike. Some contain multiple strains of a single species, while others contain multiple species. They may contain hundreds of colonies, or billions.



Most probiotic supplements are intended for general health, but some are created to address a specific problem, such as irritable bowel syndrome or Crohn's disease. Your doctor can help you decide whether a specific formulation of probiotics is the one you need.

A Primer on Prebiotics

Whether you're adding probiotics or going with what you've got, you need to feed those good bacteria so they'll thrive. Eating particular plant fibers, called prebiotics, is a great way to stimulate their growth.

Prebiotics are found in many fruits and vegetables, particularly ones that contain the most fiber. Apples, bananas, oranges and pears are great fruits to keep on hand for this. Raspberries beat them all with eight grams of fiber per cup. Peas, broccoli,

brussels sprouts and turnip greens are the most fiber-packed veggies to have on hand.

Whole-grain foods, such as whole-wheat pasta, quinoa and oatmeal, are high-fiber staples for any pantry. But the biggest fiber impact of all comes from lentils, black beans and chia seeds, all of which contain at least 10 grams of fiber per cup.

With so many great prebiotic foods to choose from, there's little reason for prebiotic supplements, but they are commercially available. If allergies or aversions prevent you from eating a wide variety of foods, consider consulting with a registered dietitian for advice on supplements.

Go with Your Gut

Now that you know about the tiny microorganisms fighting around the clock for your health, you may begin to think more about what you're feeding them. You already knew that eating a variety of plant-based foods was good for you, but now you know you're not the only life sustained by it.

Aside from probiotics and prebiotics, here are some dietary tips to help the good guys in your gut:

Watch out for sugar and fat. Everyone loves a good cheesecake, but if you make these things a habit instead of a rare treat, you're feeding the bad bacteria.

Be wary of processed foods. If your meal comes prepared in a box or a bag, it's likely been through processing that obliterates the fiber your good bacteria thrive on. Worse, it may be loaded with sugar and fat that aids the enemy.

Focus on fruits and vegetables. Challenge yourself to get five servings each day. This will help you feed the good bacteria, and will also help you lower your consumption of the animal proteins that help bad bacteria flourish.

Once you've established these good habits, you'll likely notice some pleasant changes from your gut, like more regular bowel movements and less bloating. You may even notice improved overall physical and mental health. That's a pretty sweet payoff for taking good care of yourself and your microscopic companions.