

Why Gut Health Matters

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Why Gut Health Matters

These days, it seems like everyone is talking about gut health. Far from a trend, gut health is paramount to our overall well-being. As new research emerges, we learn more and more about the human microbiome, immunity, and gut function, but for now, let's examine what we know and how gut health influences our overall wellness.

Gut Health 101:

The "gut" consists of the stomach, intestines, and the colon. These organs are involved in digestion, a sequential process that breaks down food, absorbs nutrients, and removes waste. The lining of the intestinal tract serves as a defensive barrier, preventing non-nutrient substances from passing into the bloodstream. Gut health primarily centers on maintaining the intestinal lining, balancing the microbiome, and supporting digestive processes. When assessing gut health, the focus is on the efficiency and quality of digestion as well as the diversity and quality of microorganisms that make up the microbiome. The human microbiome consists of microorganisms that can be beneficial or detrimental to our health and consist of "good" and "harmful" bacteria, viruses, and fungi. When balanced, the digestive system and the microbiome work together to promote better and more efficient nutrient absorption.

To promote a healthy gut, we need to protect the intestinal lining and create a favorable environment for good bacteria while crowding out harmful microorganisms. We also need to introduce and maintain a variety of good bacteria in the gut microbiome. What we consume directly impacts our microbiome and, in turn, our short and long-term health.





One way our overall health can be affected is through inflammation in the gut, which can lead to disease. For example, gluten, the protein in flour that gives bread and pasta its classic chewy consistency, can activate a substance in the gut called zonulin that increases intestinal permeability. When

the intestinal lining is compromised, substances that should be passed in the feces are allowed to enter the bloodstream. The immune system recognizes these foreign substances as harmful, which triggers the inflammatory response. A lack of nutrient absorption can also cause a decline in health since proper nutrition is required for every bodily function and organ. So, while it's tempting to focus solely on the organs of the gastrointestinal tract when discussing digestion and gut health, the state of this system has wide-spreading implications throughout our bodies, minds, and spirits. It can affect not only our physical health but also our mental health and immune function, which means we need to pay special care to nourish ourselves holistically. After all, Hippocrates himself proclaimed that "all disease begins in the gut."

Lifestyle Factors that Impact Gut Health

Two categories of lifestyle factors affect gut health: controllable and uncontrollable. Uncontrollable factors include our mother's health, how we were birthed (i.e., c-section or vaginally), whether we were breastfed or bottle-fed, some environmental factors, and our age. Moms with healthy microbiomes who have natural births and breastfeed their babies provide the most optimal microorganisms to establish their newborns' microbiomes.

Lifestyle factors we can control include getting enough sleep, eating a variety of whole fiber-rich foods, exercising, limiting processed foods and antibiotic use, and avoiding smoking and drinking. Antibiotics may be required at times, but it's essential to know that while their goal is to eliminate harmful bacteria, they can also kill good bacteria. Always consult your healthcare provider to determine whether antibiotics are the right choice for you, and consider consuming probiotic-rich foods or supplements to restore your microbiome as needed.

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Assessing Your Gut Health

Signs that your gut health needs attention include frequent illness, autoimmune conditions, gastrointestinal distress, sleep problems, fatigue, and emotional concerns such as anxiety or low mood. Some digestive symptoms to watch out for include gas, bloating, heartburn, diarrhea, and constipation. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms or have a medical diagnosis, always follow the guidance of your treating physician and review any recommendations with them to ensure that they are appropriate for you.

Improving Your Gut Health

Improving gut health requires a multi-disciplinary approach. It is a holistic endeavor that correlates with many other steps to improve health, such as eating whole foods, drinking water, and getting enough exercise. However, adding measures that directly improve gut health magnifies the benefits of a holistic lifestyle.

At Trinity, we first focus on the individual, including their lifestyle choices, which we refer to as the Foundations of Health. The nine foundational choices we teach to assess are air and breathing, water, food, exercise, rest, sunlight, balanced emotions, body and energy work, and spirituality. Before focusing exclusively on improving your gut health, examine the quality of your foundations. Are you getting ample sleep? Do you drink enough water so that your urine is mostly clear with a tinge of yellow? Your foundations can affect your overall wellness and, in turn, your gut health in many ways, so it's vital to ensure you have a good foundation or base to start with before narrowing in on gut support.

After addressing your foundations, consider introducing more prebiotics and probiotics, taking digestive enzymes, and eating fermented foods like pickles to support gut health. Prebiotics are high-fiber foods that beneficial bacteria need to flourish, such as whole grains, leafy greens, and artichokes. You can consume prebiotics through the foods you eat or through supplementation as needed. Probiotics contain live beneficial microorganisms that promote a healthy microbiome.



You can introduce probiotics through foods like yogurt, sour pickles, soft cheeses, kefir, sourdough bread, miso soup, and sauerkraut. When selecting probiotics, a key phrase to look for is "live and active cultures," which indicates the presence of beneficial bacteria. You can also take probiotics via supplementation as needed. It's important to note that it's more likely that you will need probiotics from supplementation than prebiotics if you previously addressed your foundations and incorporated whole foods into your diet.

Digestive enzymes are another factor that can benefit digestion. Digestive enzymes are either naturally created in the body or consumed through supplementation. They are proteins produced in the mouth, pancreas, and small intestine that function as catalysts in the chemical reactions that occur during digestion. When the body doesn't create one or more of these enzymes, we won't be able to digest the associated nutrients. For example, lactase is a digestive enzyme that breaks down lactose, a sugar found in milk. When lactase isn't available, we can experience lactose intolerance, resulting in upset stomach and other uncomfortable symptoms. Digestive enzymes work alongside probiotics to improve digestion and nutrient absorption, but they have very different functions. Digestive enzymes improve overall digestion and nutrient absorption, whereas probiotics create a healthy environment for nutrient absorption to occur. If you decide to supplement with digestive enzymes or pre-and probiotics, conduct adequate research to find reputable brands or work with a natural health professional.

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Conclusion:

Your gut health is a significant factor that influences your overall wellness. Establishing a holistic mindset and improving your Foundations of Health are excellent ways to improve your gut health. Along with adjusting your lifestyle choices, you can directly support your gut health by increasing pre- and probiotic consumption through fiber-rich foods and eating more fermented foods. You can also improve overall digestion and nutrient absorption through digestive enzyme activity by eating whole foods or supplementing enzymes during meals. Consider working with your healthcare provider or a natural health professional for guidance and an individualized approach to improve your gut and overall health.

Are you fascinated by natural health and want to learn how to support yourself holistically? Consider taking our Certified Natural Health Professional program. This program is an excellent fit for parents interested in supporting their family's wellness or individuals interested in working in the natural health field and helping others. To learn more about this program or enroll, visit trinityschool.org/program/cnhp or call 800-428-0408 to speak with an Enrollment Specialist.

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