

Gut Health and the Microbiome

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD



Did you know that your digestive system is home to trillions of live bacteria, viruses and other microbes? Together they make up your gut microbiome. These microbes are very important: they aid digestion and support immune health.

What you eat affects the microbes in your gut. To support a healthy gut microbiome, include these in your meals:

Plant foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts and beans. The fiber and other nutrients in these foods support gut health.

Prebiotic-rich foods, which contain fermentable fibers that feed the beneficial gut microbes. Prebiotics may help improve digestive function, support the immune system and improve mineral absorption. Prebiotic-rich foods include:

- Asparagus.
- Onion.
- Bananas.
- Beans, soy and peas.
- Garlic.
- Jerusalem artichokes.
- Wheat and rye.

Fermented foods contain live microbes that can support gut balance. Examples include yogurt, kefir (an effervescent dairy beverage), kombucha and pickled vegetables such as sauerkraut and kimchi. Eating fermented foods regularly may improve the diversity of gut bacteria.

Look for fermented foods that specifically state they contain “live active cultures.” They will most likely be refrigerated to preserve the bacteria. Choose sauerkraut and kimchi from the fridge instead of shelf-stable versions.

Do any foods harm gut health? Alcohol and sugary, ultra-processed foods may lower the diversity in your gut microbiome or promote overgrowth of less-healthy bacteria. New studies also suggest that artificial sweeteners may harm gut health over time.

Do probiotics supplements help? It depends. Probiotics are live bacteria found in supplements. Some specific probiotic strains have been shown to help with certain conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome or diarrhea. But for effectiveness, you need to take the right amount of a particular probiotic strain that’s been clinically tested for a certain health condition. Those are listed at usprobioticguide.com, or speak with your health care provider.



September is Cholesterol Education Month.

Revised Cholesterol Testing



For decades, doctors have urged us to help protect our cardiovascular health by checking our cholesterol levels. Recently, the American College of Cardiology and the American Heart Association updated guidelines for cholesterol levels.

Here’s what you may expect your health care provider to do:

Assess your risk earlier. Updated tools now estimate your 10- and 30-year risk of heart attack and stroke starting in your 30s — using your cholesterol, blood pressure, age and health habits — so elevated risk can be caught and addressed sooner rather than in middle age.

Set a target for your LDL (“bad”) cholesterol based on that risk. The new guidelines bring back specific LDL goals — see the desirable levels in the box below.

Start with healthy lifestyle habits — a healthy weight, regular activity, no tobacco and good sleep — then add a cholesterol-lowering medication such as a statin earlier than in the past if your numbers stay above goal.

Consider added tests when your risk is unclear, such as a one-time lipoprotein(a) measurement or a coronary calcium scan, which can help your provider decide whether medication is warranted.

A standard cholesterol test measures several fats (lipids) in your bloodstream.

Desirable levels include:

- Total cholesterol lower than 200 mg/dL.
- LDL cholesterol lower than 100 mg/dL.*
- HDL cholesterol higher than 40 mg/dL.
- Triglycerides lower than 150 mg/dL.

* Under 70 mg/dL if your risk is high, and under 55 mg/dL if you’ve had a heart attack or other cardiovascular event.

For lowering cardiovascular risk, lifestyle remains primary. The new guidelines emphasize regular exercise, healthy sleep and tobacco cessation, as well as treating obesity.



Addiction: What You Need to Know

Addictions can develop not only to illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine, but also to legal substances such as alcohol and certain prescription medications. Over time, excessive use can lead to cravings, ability to tolerate higher doses and withdrawal symptoms when the substance is taken away. Addictions appear to be triggered by multiple factors, including:

Genetics: Having a close blood relative with a history of substance abuse can raise one's risk for addictions. Exactly how this works has yet to be determined.

Other mental health issues: Conditions such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder can increase the chances that someone will turn to addictive substances to cope.

Environment: Being around others who abuse substances, or having ready access to habit-forming drugs, can increase the chances of developing an addiction.

Addictions can have serious, even life-threatening, complications. Fortunately, there is help available. Visit [FindTreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov) or ask your health care provider for a referral.

Breathing and Anxiety

By Eric Endlich, PhD

Breathing and anxiety are closely linked — the way you breathe can either reduce or fuel anxious feelings. Fast, shallow breathing, or hyperventilation, commonly occurs during anxiety and can cause symptoms such as lightheadedness, tingling, chest tightness, or a racing heart. Noticing these sensations often triggers increased worry, creating a feedback loop that can escalate into a full-blown panic attack. Panic attacks are generally harmless, though they may be quite frightening.



But there's good news: Deliberate breathing can quickly reverse this anxiety cycle. Slow, deep breathing activates the body's relaxation response and helps shut down the fight-or-flight reaction. To practice, find a quiet, comfortable spot and aim for at least five to ten minutes daily. Inhale gently for four to six seconds, then exhale slowly for six to eight seconds; focusing on a longer out-breath helps lower heart rate. Picture your belly inflating like a balloon. Lying on your back with one hand on your belly and one on your chest can help: the belly hand should rise more, indicating you're using a muscle called the diaphragm.

If you feel dizzy while practicing, pause, breathe normally for a minute, then resume with slightly shallower breaths. Progress gradually; benefits will accumulate with regular practice. Breathing techniques are a simple, portable tool you can use anywhere: during stressful moments, before sleep, or as part of daily self-care to reduce anxiety and regain a sense of calm.

If you live with chronic pain, you aren't alone.

September is Pain Awareness Month, an opportunity to learn about chronic pain, which lasts for more than three months. It affects more than one in five Americans and can range from ongoing back and nerve pain to chronic migraines and pain from past injuries or ongoing conditions, such as arthritis and diabetes. Chronic pain can interfere with work, recreation and family relationships. If you have chronic pain, talk to your health care provider about pain-relieving procedures, medications, exercises and relaxation techniques which may reduce discomfort and, if needed, counseling to help you cope. Learn more at [acpanow.com](https://www.acpanow.com).

Guys, How's Your Health?

- 1] Sound sleep** is critical to building your body's defenses against infection, illness and heart disease.
- 2] For men**, having 15 or more alcoholic drinks per week is heavy drinking, which can cause poor sleep, poor work, chronic health problems and premature aging.
- 3] Don't ignore signs of depression:** ongoing worry, sadness and other negative feelings.
- 4] Take care of your ticker.** Keep your weight and blood pressure in check, and get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise, such as brisk walking, each week.

- 5] Use a minimum SPF 30 sunscreen** outdoors to help prevent skin cancer and face wrinkles.
- 6] Strength training** can help preserve your muscle strength and manage or prevent many chronic health conditions, including arthritis and back pain. Get your provider's okay first if you have a chronic ailment.
- 7] Add daily doses of fruits, vegetables and leafy greens.** They're packed with vitamins and minerals.



- 8] Get routine medical and dental exams.** Maintain a strong relationship with your health care providers.



Smart Moves Toolkit: personalbest.com/extras/26V9tools. Printable download: [Food Close to Home](#).

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