

Maintaining beneficial bacteria

By NG KAR FOO and LEE ZHENG YII

HAVING good gut health is crucial for good overall health. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, even went as far as saying that all diseases begin in the gut.

In fact, the gut is the largest immune organ in our body.

Common problems related with the digestive system include inflammatory bowel disease, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), diarrhoea, constipation and bloating.

While common digestive problems are seldom fatal, your quality of life can be badly affected if they occur frequently.

In the long run, they may severely impact your overall health.

Studies show that the balance of gut microbiota is vital in maintaining your gut and overall health.

There are various ways to control the balance of gut microbiota and improve gut health, especially through a healthy diet and lifestyle.

Thus, it is important that you make the time to take care of your gut health.

Balancing bacteria

One of the key functions of the gut is to digest food and extract the nutrients that our body needs.

It also functions as part of our body's immune system, forming up to 80% of our body's defences against illnesses.

The intestines are home to immune "sensors" called Peyer's patches, which play a key role in identifying harmful pathogens in our gut and triggering our body's immune response against them, as the gut is the first point of entry to our body.

An often overlooked, yet critically important factor in determining good gut health is the gut microbiota, which is the collection of microorganisms in our gut.

Gut microbiota consists of the entire population of microorganisms living in our digestive system, comprising both "good" and "bad" bacteria.

Good gut health can be maintained when the balance of bacteria is kept at about 85% good bacteria to 15% bad bacteria.

However, there are times when the balance of the gut microbiota is upset.

Dysbiosis is the term used to describe

Our gut health is dependent on the balance of good and bad bacteria in our digestive system.

this situation, which often leads to an uncontrolled increase in the number of bad bacteria.

It can be caused by medication, chemicals/toxins in our surroundings, sudden dietary changes, excessive alcohol consumption or high levels of stress.

Symptoms may vary in intensity and include bad breath, upset stomach, constipation, bloating and diarrhoea.

Simple tips

To maintain good gut health, it is important that you practise a healthy lifestyle.

Here are some tips to take care of your gut health:

● Practise balance, moderation and variety in your daily diet

The basics of healthy

eating can be summed up by the princi-

ples of balance, moderation and variety (BMV), which are critical for a healthy lifestyle.

BMV means that one's daily diet should be balanced to meet all your nutritional needs.

Include foods from all five food groups in the Malaysian Food Pyramid, served in moderate portions in accordance with the recommended number of servings per food group, and comprising a variety of foods from each food group.

● Include foods rich in fibre and prebiotics

The importance of dietary fibre cannot be overstated.

Non-digestible dietary fibre helps to regulate bowel movement and gives the correct consistency and bulk to stool.

Certain dietary fibres are a source of prebiotics, which serve as food for the bacteria in the gut.

Good sources

for dietary fibre include legumes, whole grains and wholegrain products, vegetables and fruits, while prebiotic-rich foods include garlic, onion, asparagus and bananas.

Fructo-oligosaccharides, inulin and oligosaccharides are also excellent examples of prebiotics that are added to food products.

● Consume probiotic-rich foods

Another way to minimise the risk of dysbiosis and improve your gut health is by eating foods containing probiotics or "good" bacteria, as these help you to maintain a healthy gut microbiota balance.

They can also provide other health benefits, such as improving gastrointestinal disorders like IBS, diarrhoea and constipation, and enhancing your immunity.

Foods that are rich in probiotics include cultured milk and fermented milk products with probiotic cultures.

Some traditional home-prepared fermented foods can also be potential sources of beneficial bacteria, such as *tapai*, homemade yoghurt (*airu*), *tempeh* and *kimchi*.

● Drink plenty of water

Drink at least eight glasses of plain water daily.

Sufficient fluids are needed to prevent constipation and aid in food digestion.

Fibre pulls water into the colon to create softer and bulkier stools, allowing them to pass through more easily.

● Be active

Maintaining a physically active lifestyle and a healthy body weight allows your gut to function under optimal working conditions.

Without you knowing it, your gut and your immune system are actively communicating with each other.

A balanced gut microbiota is essential for gut health, which in turn can have an important impact on your overall health.

Take the above simple steps to take care of your gut every day.

Remember: Keep your gut happy, keep yourself healthy!

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Are you a fan of *kimchi*? Good news, it's a source of beneficial bacteria, which can help you maintain a healthy gut microbiota balance.

