



This week...

Go with Your Gut

*Did you know that your gut has its own **ecosystem**?*

The incredible complexity of your digestive track and its importance to our overall health has been the subject of much research in the medical community. Numerous studies have demonstrated links between gut health and the immune system, mood, mental health, autoimmune diseases, endocrine disorders, weight gain, skin conditions, and cancer.

Your gut relies on just the right balance of different bacteria to digest your food and to prevent infection and inflammation. The term '**gut microbiome**' refers specifically to the microorganisms living in your intestines. Most bacteria in the gut belong to one of four groups: *Firmicutes*, *Bacteroidetes*, *Actinobacteria* or *Proteobacteria*. Each group plays an important role in your health and requires different nutrients for growth.

One person has about 300 to 500 different species of bacteria in their digestive tract. While some microorganisms are harmful to our health, many are incredibly beneficial and even necessary for a healthy body. All in all, evidence shows that **having a wide variety of good bacteria** in your gut significantly enhances your overall health!

What puts our gut health at risk?

Gut health changes are most often caused by shifts in stomach acid, gut immunity, and the gastrointestinal flora — the complex ecosystem of bacteria in our digestive systems. The following are conditions that harm gut bacteria:

No diversity in your diet

A diet lacking in a variety of different whole foods can result in a loss of gut flora diversity. This can cause a number of negative health effects.

Alcohol

Generally speaking, alcohol consumption has a harmful effect on gut bacteria. However, the polyphenol content in red wine may have a protective effect on gut bacteria when consumed in moderation.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics are important medicines used to treat infections and diseases caused by bacteria, such as urinary tract infections and strep throat. They work by either killing bacteria or preventing them from multiplying, and have saved millions of lives over the past 80 years. However, one of their drawbacks is that they affect both good and bad bacteria. In fact, even a single antibiotic treatment can lead to harmful changes in the composition and diversity of the gut flora.

Antibiotics usually cause a short-term decline in good bacteria and can temporarily increase harmful bacteria. Long term use of antibiotics can also lead to lasting alterations in your gut flora. After completing a dose of antibiotics, most bacteria return after one to four weeks, but they often don't fully return to previous levels.

Lack of physical exercise

Regular physical activity promotes the growth of beneficial gut bacteria. These positive effects are not seen in individuals who are inactive.

Not enough sleep

The body has a 24-hour internal clock called the circadian rhythm. Sleep deprivation can disrupt the circadian rhythm, and this appears to have harmful effects on gut bacteria.

Excess Stress

Excess stress has been shown to reduce gut flora diversity and alter gut flora profiles by increasing harmful bacteria like *Clostridium* and reducing beneficial bacteria like *Lactobacilli*.

Smoking

Smoking has detrimental effects on nearly every organ in the body. Giving up smoking can improve gut health by increasing the diversity of the gut flora, and this can occur after only nine weeks.

How can I improve my gut health?

Here are some ways we can increase the flora in our gut, feed the good bacteria and reduce the harm to our delicate internal ecosystem:

- **Eat more prebiotic foods.** Prebiotics act as food for our healthy gut bacteria. Eat plenty of foods rich in prebiotic fibers, such as legumes, beans, onions, asparagus, brussels sprouts, oats, bananas, garlic, onions, ginger, and nuts.
- **Regularly incorporate probiotic foods into your diet.** Probiotic foods are full of good bacteria already. A significant source of probiotics are fermented foods as it contains live bacteria. This may increase the abundance of healthy gut bacteria. The following are excellent sources of probiotic foods:
 - Yogurt
 - Apple cider vinegar
 - Kimchi
 - Tempeh
 - Sourdough
 - Olive Oil
 - Miso
 - Kefir
 - Sauerkraut
 - Almonds

Learn more about these types of food [here](#).

- **Eat foods rich in polyphenols.** Good sources of polyphenols include blueberries, red wine, dark chocolate, and green tea. Polyphenols are not digested very efficiently and often make their way to the colon, where they are digested by bacteria.

- **Make time for quality sleep.** To improve sleep quality, try cutting out caffeine late in the day, sleeping in complete darkness, and sticking to a structured sleep routine so that you go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day.
- **Reduce stress.** Regular exercise, meditation and deep breathing exercises can reduce your stress levels. If you feel overwhelmed with stress on a regular basis, you may want to consider getting support through psychotherapy.

Check out these videos on gut health:

- [Your Gut Microbiome: The Most Important Organ You've Never Heard Of | Erika Ebbel Angle](#) | TEDxFargo
- [You are your microbes - Jessica Green and Karen Guillemin](#) | TED-Ed

If you would like to contribute, or have ideas about what you would like to see in the **ReFresh** series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.

Sources:

- [Healthline | Gut Health](#)
- [Hopkins Medicine | 5 Ways to Support Gut Health](#)
- [WebMD | Digestive Disorders: Best and Worst Foods for Gut Health](#)