Digest This

Slowly but surely science is showing that good bacteria in our gut supports gastrointestinal health and shields us from a whole slew of diseases.

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Just like human beings, the bacteria in our gut require proper nourishment. These tiny microorganisms need us to eat a nutritious, balanced diet so they can keep our bodies healthy and free from digestive problems that can lead to diabetes and a host of other illnesses.

“Many people don’t realize that the gut is the core of our health,” says Brenda Watson, a certified nutritionist, naturopathic doctor and author of The Skinny Gut Diet. “When the amount of bad bacteria, or what we call pathogenic bacteria, in our gut overwhelms the good bacteria there, people develop a condition called leaky gut [syndrome], an inflammation of the digestive tract, as a result of diet.”

According to Watson, a big part of the problem with the American diet is that it lacks enough fiber. Dietary fiber is the indigestible part of plant foods that barrels through our digestive system. Fiber, a.k.a. roughage, is of two types: soluble and insoluble.

Soluble fiber dissolves in water and becomes gel-like after it’s fermented by bacteria in the digestive tract and absorbs water. Insoluble fiber remains unchanged as it moves through the digestive tract. Both types are key to good health because neither soluble nor insoluble fiber is digested. Good sources of these indigestible carbs are whole grains, fresh fruits and veggies, legumes and nuts.

When we don’t eat enough roughage, problems can arise. “Over a period of time, the lack of fiber in our diet, and the overconsumption of more processed foods and sugar, causes blood sugar to become unstable,” Watson says.

Fiber slows down the way sugar enters the bloodstream, she adds, so blood sugar levels don’t spike. (Elevated blood sugar level is a key symptom of diabetes.) “We need anywhere from 25 to 35 grams of fiber in the diet,” Watson explains. “But the average American gets about 10 to 12 grams of fiber each day.”

When she wrote her book, Watson says she worked with a group of people and tested their fasting blood sugar levels each morning and after they ate a meal. “As we began to change their diet, surprisingly, many people who were prediabetic moved off that chain,” she says.

Watson also suggests eating low-sugar fruits, such as berries and Granny Smith apples. “People assume that all fruits are great, but when you’re having problems with blood sugar, you need to stick to low-sugar fruits.”

Watson says she’s found that people who develop diabetes often also suffer from an overgrowth of bad bacteria. “Once you begin to build your good bacteria level back up in your gut—your lactobacillus and bifidobacteria—then you begin to have your immunity restored, too.”

Some common foods that can provide nourishment for the good bacteria in our gut are Jerusalem artichokes, dandelion greens, garlic, leeks, onions and asparagus. The fiber in these veggies and greens are known as prebiotics and act as nutrients to promote the growth of good bacteria called probiotics.

Prebiotics and probiotics help to keep our intestines healthy by assisting our bodies in digesting food, and doctors believe they also help support the immune system. “While probiotics are inside your digestive tract, they’re making vitamins C and K, helping you fight off any type of virus or bacterial infection and making sure you have healthy bowel movements,” Watson explains. “There are so many things these friendly bacteria do, and there are absolutely no side effects to them.”

The most common probiotics originate from the two groups previously mentioned, lactobacillus and bifidobacterium. But other bacteria are classified as being probiotics too. According to the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA), each group of bacteria contains different species and each species has different strains. These different strains have different benefits for different parts of your body.

The association explains that, “in general, not all probiotics are the same, and they don’t all work the same way.” For example, some of these microorganisms support the immune system and help food move through the gut, while others may help relieve symptoms of lactose intolerance, a condition that occurs when people cannot digest the lactose found in most milk and dairy products.

In recent years, manufacturers have deluged consumers with a flood of probiotic products. But scientists and doctors are clamoring for more studies “to help determine which probiotics are beneficial and which might be a waste of money,” notes the AGA.

At health food stores, bottles of probiotic supplements line the shelves with dosages of 25, 50, 75, even 90 billion strains. How do you know what to choose? Watson says it depends on what health issue you have. “If you’re suffering from a problem, I suggest you at least take 50 billion per capsule,” she says. “If you’re doing maintenance, I’d say take 30 billion.”

Watson also focuses on the havoc wreaked by antibiotics and other substances that we unknowingly consume in our food. “People are eating dairy and protein from animals that are fed antibiotics in their water,” she says. “We’re getting pesticides on our food that destroy the friendly bacteria [in our gut], and people take acid-blocking medications like they’re candy. These things destroy good bacteria. I call probiotics the multivitamin for the digestive tract.”

Specifically, probiotics prevent gastrointestinal problems, such as gas and bloating, diarrhea, candida overgrowth, irritable bowel syndrome, constipation and acid indigestion. “But they’re also good at building immunity, especially during the times of year when we have cold or flu season,” Watson says. “A lot of people don’t realize that probiotics boosts the immune system when you travel, and they’re also helpful for many people with skin problems such as eczema.”

Currently, scientists are studying gut bacteria in connection with a host of conditions and illnesses, including obesity, inflammation, anxiety and even depression.

Watson’s Skinny Gut Diet program is based on the link between gut bacteria and the immune system. In her book, she theorizes that when bad bacteria overwhelm the good microorganisms in the gut, this imbalance creates inflammation, and this, in turn, causes obesity. When there’s a balance between bad and good bacteria in the gut, Watson says, this quells inflammation and makes people much less likely to become obese.

In her family, Watson says type 2 diabetes runs rampant. “On my mom’s side, my grandfather and great grandfather were diabetic,” she reveals. “I haven’t become diabetic because I’ve understood the real effect that food has on how healthy or well I’ll be. Changing the diet can actually reverse diabetes and help type 2 diabetics to become normal.”

Recently, Watson has been working on programs for public television that explore these types of issues. In one segment, she talked to a patient who had been on antidepressants throughout college and during her professional years as an attorney and an executive at a major corporation.

After the woman decided she no longer wanted to use drug therapy, Watson recalls, she went to see a psychiatrist who used diet and probiotics to wean her off the antidepressants. “It was very interesting to see the level of health that she achieved, especially coming off those heavy drugs. She became a healthy person mentally and emotionally,” Watson says. “Her story was very enlightening.”

Interestingly, long ago, traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine recognized the importance of good digestion as the basis for good health.

Says Watson, “I’m happy that science is catching up. That’s been exciting for me to see.”

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