

# BALANCING YOUR GUT

Joanna Baker helps you enhance your gut health.

**Y**our gut does more than just digest food; it also houses the trillions of healthy bacteria that directly contribute to the health of your gut (often referred to as 'gut microbiome'). While science is just beginning to understand the complexity of these bacteria they have already linked them to body weight, immunity, diabetes, heart disease, bowel cancer, inflammatory conditions, mental health and even sleep patterns. The more we learn, the more it becomes apparent that balancing our gut microbiome is critical to our overall health and wellbeing.

The relationship between humans and gut bacteria is intricate. These bacteria rely on us for a place to live, and the food we eat provides them with energy and nourishment. At the same time, humans rely on them to synthesise certain B vitamins and vitamin K, as well as metabolising waste products. In doing this they also produce hormones and other compounds that are essential for normal body functions.

Here are three simple ways to help your gut remain healthy.

## Step 1. Include variety

We have five food groups, each of which provides different types of nutrients. For example fruits and vegetables are packed with vitamins and minerals, while whole grains provide us with energy through the day and fibre. As soon as we start restricting foods or food groups we limit the access to certain nutrients and narrow the playing field. Eating a balanced variety of foods from each of the five food groups every day provides the body with the vast array of nutrients they need to function well. My rule of thumb to balance a meal is to aim for at least three different food groups in a main meal and two food groups in a snack.

## Step 2. Eat more fibre

Fibre is the part of food that doesn't get absorbed into the body. It passes through the digestive tract, keeping the gut and bowel healthy and functioning well. A



balance of the three different types of fibre is important for gut health:

- **Soluble fibre:** acts like a sponge. It absorbs water and expands in the stomach slowing digestion and helping you to feel fuller and more satisfied. It also helps to balance cholesterol and stabilise blood glucose levels. You can get soluble fibre from fruits, vegetables, oats, barley and legumes like chick peas and kidney beans.
- **Insoluble fibre:** makes the contents of the bowel larger and softer. Keeping bowel contents large and soft means it moves through the system more easily and prevents constipation. These types of fibre also provide fuel and nourishment for the gut bacteria. You can get insoluble fibre from wholegrain breads and cereals, nuts, seeds and the skins of fruit and vegetables.
- **Resistant starch:** this type of fibre is not digested in the small bowel and passes into the colon where it improves bowel health and reduces risk of bowel cancer. You can get resistant starch from undercooked pasta, firm bananas and cooked and cooled potato and rice.

## Step 3. Manage stress

The gut and the brain have a very close relationship. They communicate via a

### JOANNA BAKER, APD AN RN

Joanna is an Accredited Practising Dietitian, Accredited Nutritionist and a Registered Nurse. Joanna is the founder of Everyday Nutrition and translates the latest gut health science into practical resources, to help people get their gut back in balance, and to improve their overall health. To learn more about Joanna go to [www.everydaynutrition.com.au](http://www.everydaynutrition.com.au)



bi-directional signalling system. Gut flora produce a range of molecules and hormones that regulate gut action, stimulate nerve pathways and communicate with the brain. Changes in gut bacteria result in changes in the molecules and hormones and affect brain function. Likewise, stress hormones slow digestion and can increase muscle spasms in the gut. This can cause changes in gut bacteria and trigger symptoms like diarrhoea and constipation. Using mindfulness, meditation, light exercise and other relaxation techniques can be beneficial for winding down the entire nervous system, balancing hormones and maintaining a healthy gut.

## Final thoughts

The complex balance of bacteria that contribute to our gut health is as diverse and individual as fingerprints. It is, however, also sensitive and prone to changing over time, depending on how well we look after them. By enjoying plenty of food variety, fibre and stress management techniques you can nourish your gut, leaving you feeling fantastic, both inside and out. **Y**

