Star Special

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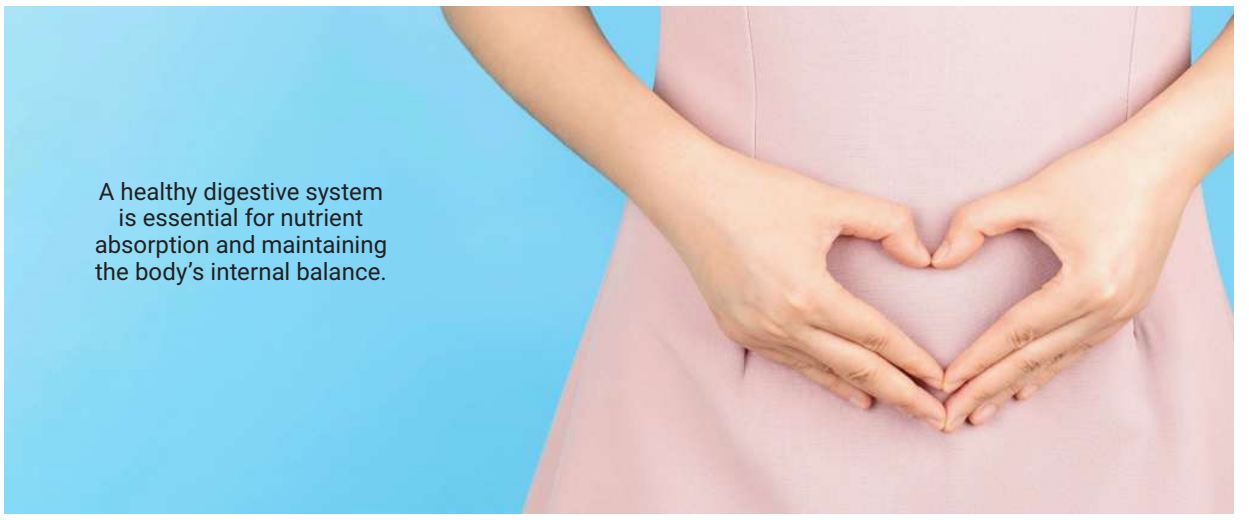
DIGESTIVE HEALTH & YOU



A healthy digestive system is essential for nutrient absorption and maintaining the body's internal balance.

How your digestive system functions

THE digestive system is a remarkable network that helps keep your body healthy and functioning properly.

It breaks down the food you eat, absorbs essential nutrients and removes waste from the body. It also plays a role in protecting you from harmful bacteria and viruses.

Here are some interesting facts about your digestive system:

Flexible nature of the stomach

The human stomach is highly flexible and can expand to accommodate varying amounts of food depending on a person's eating habits. As one of the most stretchable organs in the body, it adjusts its size when needed. However, frequently eating beyond what the body needs can cause the stomach to expand beyond its usual size.

Role of the small intestine

Did you know that the stomach does not carry out most of the digestion? While it helps break down food, the majority of the digestive process actually takes place in the small intestine.

Saliva neutralises stomach acid

The amount of saliva in your mouth increases when you throw up. This is because stomach acid is highly acidic and can be harmful to the teeth, mouth and throat. Before vomiting, the body produces extra saliva as a protective response. Since saliva is alkaline, it helps to neutralise the acid and reduce its damaging effects.

Why passing gas smells bad

Ever wondered why passing gas has an unpleasant smell? Intestinal gas, also known as endogenous gas, is produced when bacteria in the colon break down food.

It mainly consists of hydrogen and, in some people, methane. While both gases are odourless, it also contains small amounts of hydrogen sulphide, which makes passing gas smell bad.

Why stomachs rumble

The "whale-like" sound your stomach makes is called borborygmus, and it doesn't only happen when you're hungry. These rumbling noises are caused by peristaltic movements in the gut as it moves food and fluids through the digestive system. This process happens all the time, but the sounds are louder when your stomach is empty because there is nothing to muffle them.

How food reaches your stomach

You don't have to worry about gravity affecting how your food reaches your stomach. Instead, a process called peristalsis moves food along. During peristalsis, the muscles in the oesophagus constrict and relax in a wavelike manner, pushing food down towards the stomach. Thanks to this process, food can reach the stomach without relying solely on gravity.

The stomach's natural protective layer

The stomach protects itself from its own acid. To aid digestion, the stomach produces hydrochloric acid, a powerful substance that breaks food down into smaller particles. To prevent this acid from damaging its lining, the stomach also produces a thick layer of mucus that acts as a protective barrier.

Without this layer, the acid could erode the stomach lining, potentially leading to ulcers and stomach pain.

While the digestive system is often associated with processing food, it also plays a vital role in protecting the body and maintaining overall health. From the mouth to the intestines, each part works together to break down food, absorb nutrients and keep the body functioning smoothly.

The next time your stomach rumbles or you wonder where your food goes after a meal, remember that this intricate system is hard at work, quietly supporting the many processes that keep us healthy each day.

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- Difficulty interacting with others
- Inappropriate laughing or giggling
- Social and communication delays
- Sensitive to change
- Repetitive or unusual play
- No fear of real dangers
- High pain tolerance
- Preference to be alone

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Why your gut is the unsung hero of immunity

YOU'VE probably heard it before: "Good health starts in the gut." It sounds like wellness jargon you'd scroll past on a smoothie ad, but science is increasingly backing it up.

Your gut isn't just a digestion machine; it's also a major command centre for your immune system, mood regulation, and even how your body responds to everyday stress.

And at the heart of this connection is something surprisingly small but powerful: your gut microbiome.

Eating a wider variety of plant-based foods can promote greater microbial diversity, which is associated with better gut health. Image credit: RDNE Stock project/Pexels

The immune HQ

Inside your digestive tract lives a vast ecosystem of trillions of microorganisms – bacteria, fungi, and viruses – collectively known as the gut microbiome. Far from being "bad germs," many of these microbes are essential allies.

It is known that around 70% of your immune system is located in or around the gut. That means your body is constantly using gut signals to decide what's friend or foe, whether it's a harmless snack you just ate or a real pathogen trying to cause trouble.

Medical experts note that when your gut microbiome is balanced, it helps train immune cells, strengthens the intestinal barrier, and even reduces unnecessary inflammation.

But when it's disrupted, mainly due to poor diet, stress, antibiotics, or lack of fibre, your immune response can become less efficient or overly reactive.

According to a Harvard Medical School-led study, the gut microbiome plays a key role in regulating immune function and inflammation, influencing how well the body defends itself against illness. [1]

Gut health is closely linked to immune function.

When balance goes off track

Think of your gut like a bustling city. When everything is balanced, traffic flows smoothly, waste is cleared efficiently, and services run well. But when "bad bacteria" start to dominate or diversity drops, the system gets chaotic.

You might not immediately feel it as gut discomfort. Instead, it can show up as frequent colds, low energy, skin issues, or sluggish recovery after illness. That's because immune resilience is deeply tied to microbial diversity.

Research from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) notes that gut bacteria interact directly with immune cells, influencing how the body responds to infection and inflammation. [2]

Enter probiotics: the "good bacteria" boost. The World Health Organization defines probiotics as "live microorganisms which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host".

In simple terms, probiotics act like reinforcements for your gut army, helping replenish beneficial bacteria and keeping the ecosystem in balance.

You'll find them naturally in fermented foods and drinks like yoghurt, kefir, kimchi, kombucha and cultured milk drinks containing probiotics.

But here's the nuance: probiotics don't "magically fix" everything. Think of them as part of a wider lifestyle approach that includes fibre-rich foods, hydration, sleep and stress management.

Johns Hopkins University highlights that probiotics may help maintain gut balance and support digestive and immune health. [3]

Probiotic drinks: convenience meets function

If you're not big on fermented foods like kimchi or sauerkraut, probiotic drinks offer a more accessible entry point.

They're easy to integrate into daily routines – grab one on your commute, pair it with breakfast, or use it as a mid-afternoon reset.

The appeal isn't just convenience; it's consistency. Gut health benefits are linked more to regular intake than occasional "super doses".

Probiotic drinks often contain strains like Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium, which have been studied for their role in supporting digestion and immune modulation.

That said, not all probiotic drinks are created equal. Some contain high sugar levels, which can counteract gut health goals. A quick label check goes a long way: look for live cultures, clear strain information and moderate sugar content.

Probiotic drinks are helpful, but they work best when paired with a gut-friendly lifestyle:

> Eat more fibre: Fruits, vegetables, oats and legumes feed good bacteria

> Diversify your diet: More variety is associated with greater microbial diversity, which is generally linked to better gut health

> Manage stress: Chronic stress can disrupt gut balance

> Prioritise sleep: Your gut bacteria follow a daily rhythm too

> Go easy on ultra-processed foods: These can reduce microbial diversity over time

It's all connected

Gut health isn't a trend – it's a foundation. Your microbiome and immune system are constantly "talking" to each other, shaping how your body responds to the world around you.

Probiotic drinks aren't a cure-all, but they can be a simple, practical way to support that internal ecosystem – especially when life gets busy and balanced meals aren't always guaranteed.

Think of it this way: every sip is a small nudge toward better balance. And over time, those small nudges can add up to a more resilient, energised you.

Probiotic drinks offer a convenient way to incorporate beneficial bacteria into daily routines.

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[3] McKinney, C. (n.d.). Meet Probiotics-An Introduction to Gut Bacteria. Johns Hopkins Patient Guide to Diabetes. *https://hopkinsdiabetesinfo.org/meet-probiotics-an-introduction-to-gut-bacteria/*

This article is brought to you by Vitagen.

Foods rich in both probiotics and prebiotics are essential for gut health.

Diabetes hitting Malaysians at a younger age

YOU are in your twenties, full of energy and living your best life, but what if you suddenly had to start dialysis tomorrow?

Many Malaysians are currently on dialysis, and this number could more than double by 2040, costing the healthcare system up to billions of ringgit a year, according to the Galen Centre.

This is the new reality for a growing number of young Malaysians, warns Dr Benjamin Tan, Consultant Nephrologist and Internal Medicine Specialist at Damansara Specialist Hospital (DSH).

"In the past, diabetes was a disease we mostly saw in people above 40 or 50," said Dr Benjamin.

"Today, there are patients as young as 18 or 20 years old with Type 2 diabetes, and some are already in kidney failure by their early twenties."

Dr Benjamin explained that this alarming trend is largely driven by changes in modern lifestyles.

"We are seeing a shift towards diets high in sugar and carbohydrates, combined with reduced physical activity. Many young people today spend long hours sitting in front of their computers or gaming. Thirty years ago, it was common to play outdoor sports, now it's mostly sedentary," he said.

He added that convenience culture plays a major role.

"Food delivery apps have made eating easier, but also made it easier to make poor choices. It's not the technology that's the problem, it's how we use it. Even when ordering online, we can still choose healthier options," said Dr Benjamin.

> "By 2040, diabetes and kidney disease cases could increase tenfold if we don't act now."
>
> Dr Benjamin Tan

While awareness of diabetes has improved, many cases are still detected late. "Most of the time, when patients are diagnosed, the disease is already advanced. Some come in with impaired kidney function but feel completely fine," he explained.

"That's why annual health check-ups are crucial, especially for those with a family history of diabetes, hypertension, or kidney disease."

He added that kidney transplantation offers the best long-term recovery, but Malaysia's organ donation rates remain low.

"We rely heavily on living donors, usually family members. We need more deceased donors to give patients a better chance at a normal life," he said.

Dr Benjamin urged young Malaysians to take charge of their health before it's too late.

"You are never too young to get diabetes. Start with simple habits, drink sufficient plain water instead of sugary drinks, eat balanced meals and stay active," he advised.

He also called for a fresh approach to health education. "We need to meet young people where they are, on social media. TikTok, Instagram, short videos, that's how you reach them today."

If no action is taken, Dr Benjamin warned that Malaysia could face a serious health crisis.

"By 2040, diabetes and kidney disease cases could increase tenfold if we don't act now," he cautioned.

Prevention starts today. Don't wait for symptoms. Trusted for Generations, Damansara Specialist Hospital's commitment to Care for Life is about helping patients move beyond treatment towards healthier, stronger futures.

■ For more information or to consult our specialists, contact +603-7718 1000 or visit *kpjhealth.com.my/damansara*.

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Dr Benjamin Tan, Consultant Nephrologist and Internal Medicine Specialist at Damansara Specialist Hospital.

Manage your cravings with healthier snacks

SOME of us have experienced this situation: after finishing a small snack like a chocolate bar, hunger pangs return shortly after.

It is entirely possible, but those signals are not always reliable and should not be overinterpreted.

Hunger is a vital survival mechanism. When the stomach is empty and blood sugar levels drop, the brain triggers the need for food, signalling that energy needs replenishing.

However, these signals can be easily influenced. Visual cues, such as seeing food, can stimulate appetite in a way that closely resembles true hunger, according to nutrition specialists.

Blood sugar regulation can also contribute to misleading sensations. When food is consumed, the body releases insulin in phases – first a small amount, then a larger release in anticipation of a full meal.

Insulin helps move glucose from the bloodstream into the body's tissues, lowering blood sugar levels. With high-sugar foods like chocolate, insulin levels may rise sharply despite the small amount of food consumed.

As a result, blood sugar can drop quickly afterwards, creating a renewed feeling of hunger even when additional energy is not needed.

In general, a healthy body can function for extended periods without food. The body typically only enters a fasting state roughly eight to 10 hours after the last meal. However, not everyone can go that long without eating.

When snacking is unavoidable, healthier choices are recommended. Raw vegetables paired with yoghurt, along with oats and fruit, can provide steadier energy and help maintain more stable blood sugar levels.

This way, ideally, you won't be hungry again until your stomach is empty.

Eating nutrient-dense foods like oats and fruit helps provide steady energy and keeps hunger pangs at bay.

Patience is key to change

Try replacing bad habits with simple alternatives, such as quick exercises or taking deep breaths while picturing a calm beach scene.

MANY people have bitten their nails down to the nub and resolved to stop. Yet under stress, such as when a boss raises their voice, the habit often returns unconsciously.

Make goals more specific

Clearly define the behaviour you want to change in specific, concrete terms rather than vague goals.

Focus on observable actions or situations so it is easier to understand, manage and improve. This also helps you develop effective strategies and track progress more effectively.

Identifying the trigger

Recognising the trigger is key to breaking a habit. In many cases, a specific circumstance drives the behaviour. Take the example of a generally composed person who rarely bites their nails. Come tax season or annual performance review week, however, the habit resurfaces. Stress is usually the underlying cause, sometimes accompanied by a worrying thought, such as the fear of making a mistake.

Small steps, big change

Replacing a bad habit with a better one is a practical strategy. The replacement should be simple and easy to do, such as doing exercises instead of biting nails, or taking deep breaths and picturing a peaceful beach scene rather than raising one's voice.

Spot your triggers early

It is important to train yourself to notice your triggers. While this may sound simple, it can be challenging in practice. Take a moment to step back and stay aware of situations that may lead to unwanted habits. When you recognise a trigger, act as your own guide by pausing, stopping the habit and gently redirecting yourself to a more positive behaviour.

Expect occasional missteps

There will be moments when one forgets, misses a trigger or slips up. That is perfectly normal. Since the bad habit took a long time to develop, it will take time to unlearn as well. The important thing is to be patient and keep going.