A Good Gut Feeling

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR GUT HEALTH
A Good Gut Feeling

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A Good Gut Feeling

Gut health is currently a hot topic and for good reasons.

It is often assumed however, that we understand what gut health means and what we need to eat to have “good gut health”.

With so much often conflicting information circulating, the message can be confusing and overwhelming.

In this book I’ll take a step back and break it down for you – what is meant by gut health, how it affects our overall wellbeing and by using foods we can relate to, how we can look after our own gut health and that of our family.

It’s time to Love Your Guts!
What do we mean by Gut Health?

Gut health is not by any means a new concept. Around 400BC Hippocrates made his now famous proclamation that “All disease begins in the gut”.

Traditional and natural therapies have always looked at the state of the gut as a reflection of the health of the whole person and medical science is now catching on.

Gut health refers not only to the state of our digestive system, but rather to the trillions of over 500 identified strains of microbes (and possibly millions more we are yet to identify) that live within our gastrointestinal system. These microbes add up to between two and five kilograms worth of bacteria, yeasts, fungi and parasites living inside our bodies.

You may have heard these microbes also being referred to as our gut flora, microflora, microbiota or our microbiome.

All of these microbes are like a village, living inside our gastrointestinal tract, each doing their job. When our gut is well balanced and healthy, the villagers are living alongside each other in peace and harmony. Law and order, or the natural healthy functioning of our body keeps them in check. Occasionally there may be an invasion and a take over of the less desirables and the villagers fight back, peace has been overturned!

What that means for us is, if the status quo of our gut flora becomes unbalanced, this can result in illness and disease, or what is referred to as dysbiosis.

Gut health is an evolving science and new information is being learned every week, which explains why there is so much information out there and some of it conflicting.

The link between good nutrition and gut health lies in keeping our gut bacteria healthy.

This lies in the foundations of eating the right foods, having a healthy digestive system to absorb the nutrients from our food, which in turn keeps our bacteria happy. Happy gut bacteria then support our health, immune system and our psychological wellbeing.
Digestion 101

When we think of our gut, our first thought is usually of our digestive system, but this is only part of the picture. Controlling our digestive system is our Enteric Nervous System, or ENS which communicates back and forth with our brain about the overall state of health of our gut, the microflora within our gut and our immune system, our hormones that influence our mental wellbeing, as well as the actual processes of digestion.

The ENS contains over 100 million nerve cells lining our gastrointestinal tract, which is approximately nine meters long starting from our mouth, through to our anus at the other end.

Technically any food within our gastrointestinal tract (GI) is outside our body as our GI tract is one long hollow tube!

As soon as we smell food, our digestive system switches on. Signals are sent to our brain to switch the digestive process on. Saliva in our mouth coats our food as we chew. People who inhale their food compromise this step, which can lead to indigestion and nutrients not being absorbed properly. This a good reason why Grandma always told us to slow down and chew our food properly, so your stomach is ready to receive it.

As we swallow food it passes to our stomach where stomach acids and enzymes work together to break the food down into smaller particles. It is important to have a good supply of stomach acid to ensure this process takes place.

Taking antacids or heartburn medications for indigestion can in fact, make the symptoms of heartburn and indigestion worse. If you take away the acid, the food is not going to break down properly. Rather we should be supporting the production of stomach acid and digestive enzymes, so our food can be broken down ready for the nutrients to be absorbed in the small intestine.

If you have a problem with indigestion or heartburn, eating bitter foods before or at the start of a meal can stimulate these responses.

One easy way to add this to your diet is by mixing the juice of half a lemon or adding a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar to a glass of water before a meal or starting a meal with some bitter foods such as rocket with some lemon juice. There is a good reason why the Italians start their meal with a bitter aperitif!

Once the food has been broken down into a big soup in your stomach, it passes to the small intestine, where the absorption of the nutrients into the bloodstream takes place. Your small intestine needs to be in a healthy condition, as any damage or inflammation to the small intestine will impair absorption. If nutrients can’t be absorbed this can lead to nutrient deficiencies and malnutrition.
Any remaining waste materials and toxins are then moved through to the large intestine, where they are packaged up, ready for excretion, or when you feel the urge to go to the loo.

It is considered “normal” to poo two to three times daily for the healthy release of toxins and waste (once a day is NOT normal!). Your stools should be well formed and pass easily. Any need for straining or loose stools can be a sign of digestive dysfunction and should be investigated.

By looking after your gut, having your digestive system working properly to break down and absorb the nutrients from your food, lays down the foundations to support your health in many areas, including your immunity and mental well being.

You are not only what you eat, but more importantly what you digest and absorb. Your gut is the key to sustaining good health. Your digestive system turns your food into fuel. When your gut is functioning well, it boosts your energy and immune system and prevents disease. When your digestive system is sluggish, your body just cannot absorb the nutrients it needs for optimal health.

Good health really does starts in the gut!
The Gut Brain Connection

Our Gut is often referred to as our second brain. If you think about our gut instinct, our gut feel, having butterflies in our stomach, an instinct or a bad feeling, it is all linked and we have all experienced at different times, whether we were aware of it or not.

Our digestion, mood, health and even the way we think is all linked between our gut and our brain.

The Enteric Nervous System (ENS) is our connection within the layers of our gastrointestinal tract (GI) to our nervous system and therefore our brains. The ENS controls our digestive or gut behaviour independently to the brain.

Up to 70-80 percent of our brain chemicals, neurotransmitters and hormones are produced in the gut by our gut microbiota. Neurotransmitters are chemicals that communicate messages from the brain to the body.

These take care of functions we need to survive, without us having to think about them. For instance, our brain telling our heart to beat, our lungs to breathe, or our digestive tract to break down and digest our food.

Chemicals which directly affect our emotional and psychological wellbeing include: GABA, tryptophan, serotonin, histamine and dopamine.

GABA
GABA is important for remaining calm and maintaining sleep. Signs of a GABA deficiency can be anxiety and panic attacks, alcohol cravings, insomnia or a struggle to fall asleep and remain asleep throughout the night.

Serotonin
Serotonin is our “feel good” hormone and can influence our mood, quality of sleep, our weight, concentration and our overall sense of wellbeing. 90% of serotonin is produced in the gut, so if we aren’t producing enough, we’re going to feel low.

Dopamine
Dopamine affects mood regulation, memory and movement. Signs and symptoms of a dopamine deficiency may include restless legs, reduced libido, low mood, depression and a lack of dreaming when sleeping. There can be a propensity for addiction for those with low dopamine levels.
The Gut Brain Connection Continued...

A large percentage of people that present with stress, anxiety, depression and chronic fatigue conditions show that these chemicals are not being produced at optimal levels within the gut.

All these chemicals stem from our Gut and the microbiota, which is why it is imperative to look after your gut. What we eat and the way our microbiome reacts can directly affect our mood and mental health.

80 percent of our immune system also lies in the gut, which is why many people suffering from autoimmune conditions usually suffer from gut dysfunction or poor gut health.
How Food Affects Our Mood

The food we eat every day can nourish us, sustain us, excite us and at the same time make us unwell, cause disease and discomfort. The food we eat can affect not only our physical health, but our mental wellbeing and immunity.

It makes sense then, to lay the foundations in our everyday habits, so we have the tools to stay healthy and get the most out of life.

Research now shows that when digestive health is prioritised, many symptoms and conditions can be alleviated within a relatively short period of time.

Studies have also shown that a large percentage of children with autism spectrum disorders, ADD and ADHD also have digestive symptoms. By changing the child’s diet, specifically focusing on their gut health, can improve the mental or emotional condition of the child.

Sleeping well, being able to concentrate and having a stable mood are all signs you (or your child) have a properly functioning digestive system. A diet that is supportive of gut health, is one based on a variety of fresh whole foods, with minimal processed foods and sugars, can have a positive effect.
Obvious Signs of Poor Gut Health

The obvious indicators of poor gut health are digestive symptoms such as:

- Bloating
- Constipation
- Diarrhoea
- IBS
- Flatulence
- Heartburn
- Reflux
- Bad breath

The not so obvious...

As we now know, our gut health affects so much more than our digestive system. There are many less obvious conditions or symptoms linked back to poor gut health, or an imbalance between the good and bad bacteria. These include:

- Autoimmune conditions
- Food allergies and food intolerances
- Low immunity
- Joint pain
- Anxiety and depression
- Stress
- PMS, mood swings and hormonal disturbances
- Headaches and migraines
- Chronic fatigue
- Skin inflammation
- Learning and memory function
- Parkinson’s disease
- Some cancers
Causes of Poor Gut Health

There are many factors that can cause an imbalance of our gut bacteria.

DIET – not getting the right balance of nutrients required to support the digestive system.

EXCESS PROCESSED FOODS AND SUGARS – “bad” bacteria will feed on sugar, leading to an imbalance. Sugar creates an acidic environment, which destroys our beneficial bacteria and allows these opportunistic microbes to grow into large colonies which are detrimental to our health.

FAMILY GENETICS – the health of the microbiota of our grandparents and parents are passed on to us. In a vaginal birth, the beneficial and immune boosting bacteria is passed onto us as we travel through the birth canal. This essential “inoculation” is missed in babies born via Caesarean section. Studies have shown a higher incidence of atopic conditions such as asthma and eczema in children born via caesarean section.

STRESS - influences the production of our feel good neurotransmitters. Learning to manage our stress influences our gut health.

ANTIBIOTICS and other PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS including the contraceptive pill can all seriously damage and effect the gut flora by wiping out the beneficial strains of bacteria in the gut and upsetting the balance.

Regular ALCOHOL consumption can be inflammatory to our gut health. As can CIGARETTES and RECREATIONAL DRUGS, often causing chemical imbalances leading to bad moods, poor concentration, anxiety and depression.

RESTRICTIVE DIETS - By omitting entire food groups or eating the same foods day in day out can upset our digestive balance. People who eat the same breakfast and lunch every day or include a limited number of the same foods in their diet (even if it’s healthy) may also not be getting the variety of nutrients they need for optimal health.

ANTI BACTERIAL products - our obsession with cleanliness, disinfectants, anti bacteria and hand sanitizers can be detrimental to our gut health. The 99.9% of germs we are killing off includes the good bugs we need. Regular hand washing with soap and water and more natural products for our homes such as vinegar, lemon juice, sunlight and hot water are not only cheaper, better for the environment but also more beneficial to our gut health and reduce our chemical load.

INFECTIONS in our gut can also be caused by PARASITES, YEAST or BACTERIA. A comprehensive stool analysis is key in determining the levels of good bacteria as well as any infections that may be present. Removing the infections may require treatment with anti-parasitic or anti-fungal supplements, herbs, or medication, or even antibiotics.
What Is Leaky Gut?

Leaky gut is a buzz phrase that gets a lot of media coverage. Medically referred to as intestinal hyper permeability, leaky gut is problematic because instead of just nutrients being absorbed into our bloodstream, there are also food particles.

If there is an imbalance between our good and bad bugs (parasites, yeast and bacteria) inflammation can occur in our small intestine. This inflammation damages the layers of our gastrointestinal tract, which allows food fragments to pass into our bloodstream (hence leaky gut), which then triggers an inflammatory response in our body.

The best way to think of our inflammatory response, is if we get a big gash on our knee. Our inflammatory response automatically kicks in as a red, hot, swollen and painful wound, usually producing some pus before a scab forms and the healing process begins. This is a healthy inflammatory response which is designed for healing.

Imagine this same inflammatory response occurring in our digestive tract. The danger here though, is that although the response is the same, we most likely won’t be directly aware of it. If we keep piling the inflammatory triggers on our gut, we often don’t realise the damage we are inflicting on ourselves until our symptoms are more severe.

The good news is, by removing these inflammatory triggers, we can reverse our symptoms.

The crucial point to understand is:

*You don’t need to have gut symptoms to have a leaky gut.*

Leaky gut can manifest in many ways and here are some common conditions to watch for:

- Food intolerances, sensitivities or allergies.
- Frequent infections.
- Irritable bowel syndrome or IBS.
- Persistent digestive disorders such as diarrhoea, constipation, bloating, flatulence, heartburn and reflux.
- Hormone imbalances including PMS or PCOS.
- A diagnosis of an autoimmune condition such as rheumatoid arthritis, Hashimotos or Graves disease, Crohns or ulcerative colitis, coeliac disease or Type 1 diabetes.
- The onset of chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia.
- Depression, anxiety, panic disorders.
- Poor memory and concentration, brain fog, ADD or ADHD.
- Skin disorders such as persistent acne, rosacea, eczema or psoriasis.
- Suspected candida overgrowth.
Is Gluten the Bad Guy?

Gluten is the “glue” like protein found in wheat, rye and barley. Gluten is often found in processed packaged foods such as bread, cereal, cakes, crackers and biscuits. There are often hidden sources of gluten in many foods including sausages, soups, sauces, icing sugars, stocks and gravies, condiments, medications and beer.

People diagnosed with coeliac disease have an immune response to gluten. They have a genetic marker for coeliac disease, which is usually confirmed with a biopsy.

Many people can go for a long period without a diagnosis of coeliac disease, by which time there is usually significant damage done to the small intestine which impacts nutrient absorption.

A special note: Just because you have the genetic marker, doesn’t always mean you will develop coeliac disease. If you don’t have the genetic marker, you can’t develop coeliac disease.

But what about the rest of us?

Many of us may suspect that gluten isn’t doing us any favours and others, by taking gluten out of their diets may be surprised to find many non-digestive symptoms alleviated.

What we do know about gluten though, is it drives inflammation by irritating the gut, the gut microbes and the intestinal tissue, causing a leaky gut.

Gluten can also interfere with digestion by clumping, or gluing food particles together. Gluten has now also been linked to over two hundred conditions including neurotoxicity, depression, seizures, headaches, nerve damage, ADHD like symptoms and autoimmune conditions.

It’s important to be aware that it may not just be gluten that can upset our gut health.

I’ve highlighted gluten as it is one of the main inflammatory triggers, but it’s important to be mindful of other inflammatory triggers such as dairy, soy, eggs, histamines, amines, salicylates and glutamates.
How Do We Fix Our Gut Health?

The great news is we can repair and restore our gut lining and replenish our gut flora.

In the case of chronic stress and infections, it may take time but will have positive effects for your entire body including memory, mood, energy, digestion, immunity, hormone production and more.

Your conditions didn’t manifest overnight and healing a leaky gut can take time, but you can absolutely do this using fresh whole foods and you should notice symptoms alleviating within the first few weeks.

There are four key steps in healing and repairing your gut. Remove, Replace, Replenish and Repair.

It’s important to drink filtered water, at least 2 litres per day, in between meals. Fluids help to remove excess toxins and keep the bowels healthy.

Take steps to manage your stress

1. REMOVE

Remove all inflammatory foods and toxins that could be potentially triggering inflammation and your symptoms. It’s not uncommon that often the foods we crave are the ones making us unwell.

Common inflammatory foods:
- Sugar
- Gluten
- Wheat
- Dairy
- Alcohol
- Recreational drugs
- Trans fats
- Hydrolysed vegetable or seed oils: canola, sunflower, vegetable, safflower oil.
- All artificially flavoured and coloured foods
- Packaged and processed foods
- Preservatives

- Identify and remove any food sensitivities (as identified in a Hair Analysis test)
- Treat any intestinal pathogens such as parasites, yeast and bacteria
- Take steps to manage your stress triggers.
2. REPLACE

Replace what’s been removed with real, healthy fresh foods.

Address any nutrient deficiencies caused by poor diet, or medications such as the Pill, antacids, heartburn medications, anti-inflammatories.

Establish good amounts of digestive enzymes, hydrochloric acid and bile salts required for proper digestion. Bitter foods stimulate stomach acid and enzyme production. Start each day or each meal with a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar or lemon in water. Or begin eating a meal with bitter foods such as rocket drizzled with lemon juice.

Slow down when you eat and chew your food. Put your cutlery down between bites. If you catch yourself inhaling your food, count your bites. Twenty bites will slow you right down!

3. REPLENISH

Support your good gut bacteria by eating probiotic foods and nourish these bacteria by eating plenty of prebiotic foods.

Probiotics

Fermented foods are one of the best ways to add healthy bacteria to your diet and keep your gut flora balanced.

The process of fermentation converts sugars, glucose, fructose and sucrose into cellular energy and lactic acid, which enhances the nutrient profile of foods, meaning they are full of probiotics, enzymes, vitamins and minerals.

It is important to look for “lacto fermented foods” and you will find these in the fridge as they are sensitive to heat and storage.

Probiotic foods have often been used traditionally in other cultures for centuries and include:

- Sauerkraut
- Kimchi
- Kombucha
- Tempeh
- Miso paste
- Kefir
- Cultured yoghurt
- Sourdough
- Cultured condiments
- Pickled fruits and vegetables
Foods V Supplements

Probiotic foods contain a good variety of different strains, so it is hard to overdose or overpopulate a particular strain.

Other than a high quality general probiotic for short term use, probiotic supplements need to be strain specific to be effective. Too much of the wrong strain can lead to imbalances which may exacerbate symptoms. Use probiotic supplements under the guidance of your nutritionist or health care practitioner.

Examples of specific strains for specific conditions are:

- **Antibiotic use**: Lactobacillus Rhamnosus GG, taken 2 hours away from the antibiotic
- **Travellers tummy**: Saccharomyces Boulardii
- **Constipation**: Bifidobacterium animalis
- **Anxiety**: Lactobacillus helveticus

Prebiotics

Prebiotics are mostly plant based foods which are high in fibre that feeds the good bacteria in your gut.

Fibre is also extremely beneficial for general digestive function, so make sure you include plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables at most meals.

Benefits of including high fibre prebiotic foods:
- Healthy beneficial gut bacteria
- Improved digestion
- Lower risk for cardiovascular disease
- Healthier cholesterol levels
- Lower stress response
- Better hormonal balance
- Higher immune function
- Lower risk for obesity and weight gain
- Better control of blood glucose and insulin response
- Lower inflammation and autoimmune reactions

Prebiotic foods include most fruits and vegetables but especially:

- Garlic & onion
- Jerusalem artichokes
- Asparagus
- Leeks
- Bananas
- Oats
- Apples
- Flaxseed
- Sweet potato
- Seaweed
- Beans
- Legumes
4. REPAIR

Include healing and repairing foods into your diet. These are foods as close to their natural state as possible (ie unprocessed) but also bone broths, soups and stews.

To repair the lining of your gut, it is helpful to include short term use of supplements prescribed by your practitioner, such as L-glutamine, an amino acid to assist in rejuvenating the lining of the gut wall.

Other key nutrients as part of the repair process to include are zinc, omega 3 fish oils, vitamin A, C and E, as well as soothing herbs such as slippery elm and aloe vera.

Your nutritionist can advise on the therapeutic dosage requirements for gut repair.

Bone broths aren’t difficult to make, a slow cooker helps and there are plenty of recipes available online. Another alternative is to buy one ready made, or even a dehydrated product. You need to buy grass fed organic bone broth, to ensure you are getting the full nutritional benefits.
Good Gut Health for Kids

Serving up bone broth and fermented foods may not always be realistic when it comes to feeding your kids.

It is important to offer them a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables across the course of a week. They may not always eat it, but it’s important to give them exposure to a wide range of foods. If the majority of food they eat at home is healthy, then it’s OK to relax on the weekend or when you’re out.

Cultured yoghurt is the easiest place to start with probiotics. Look for natural or Greek yoghurt. If your child is used to the sweeter yoghurts, then add a little honey and cinnamon as a sweetener to help them adjust to the taste. The cultures in unsweetened yoghurts are far higher than in the more processed flavoured yoghurts.

With many probiotic foods, a spoonful is enough to get a good intake of beneficial bacteria.

Sauerkraut is amazing for our gut health and a great way to introduce this to kids is on a “hotdog”. Pop a spoonful of sauerkraut onto a decent quality sausage from the butcher, along with some mustard.

The juice or brine from fermented vegetables also contains lots of gut loving nutrients, so you can also add this to your salad dressings, along with some olive oil.

Kombucha is a fermented tea made by adding a SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture Of Bacteria and Yeast) to black or green tea. Once fermented, you can also add in some favours from fruit or even ginger to create a healthy soft drink.

Milk, water or coconut kefir can have up to 50 probiotic strains, so is worth trying with the kids. If the sour taste is too much, it can be added to a smoothie with some banana, cinnamon and honey, or used like sour cream or a dip on vegetables.

“Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food”
Hippocrates 400BC
About Kylie Pinwill

Kylie Pinwill is the owner of Livewire Nutrition and the creator of the Well Balanced Woman and the Happy Families programs. As a Clinical Nutritionist, lover of delicious food and Mum of three kids, Kylie understands the challenges of creating nutritious meals that fussy kids actually eat.

Sharing her practical approach using food as medicine and time saving tricks, Kylie offers consultations in clinic and online. She has been known to do the odd consult at the beach and on the side of a rugby field.

With so much conflicting information and assumed knowledge about healthy eating, Kylie takes meal planning, shopping and cooking back to basic and keeps it real.

More information on working with Kylie can be found at https://livewirenutrition.com.au

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