



Skip the supplements: These gut-friendly foods may already live in your kitchen



HANNA WEBSTER 

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

hwebster@post-gazette.com  

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From prebiotic sodas and probiotic gummies to expensive enzyme powders, it can be easy to spend a lot of money on products that say they'll heal your gut.

But for most people without chronic issues, it may be better to return to basics.

Around 40% of Americans avoid some daily activities because of uncomfortable gut symptoms, [according to a 2022 survey](#) by the American Gastroenterological Association. And [another poll](#) conducted in 2023 by Ipsos found that closer to two-thirds of Americans were living with gut issues.

Symptoms of bloating, cramping, diarrhea, constipation and abdominal

pain can arise when healthy bacteria in the gut that help break food down die off and are replaced with bacteria that create inflammation and nutrient deficiencies. The microbiomes of people with digestive issues also tend to be less diverse than people with healthy systems.

Doctors think that about 80% of the body's immune cells and 90% of the body's serotonin live in the gut, rendering a ripe arena for positive immune and mental health — or for inflammation, chronic disease, depression and anxiety.

“The gut rules you,” said Judith Siebart, dietitian with West Virginia University School of Medicine, specializing in medical weight management. “It rules things we don’t even understand.”

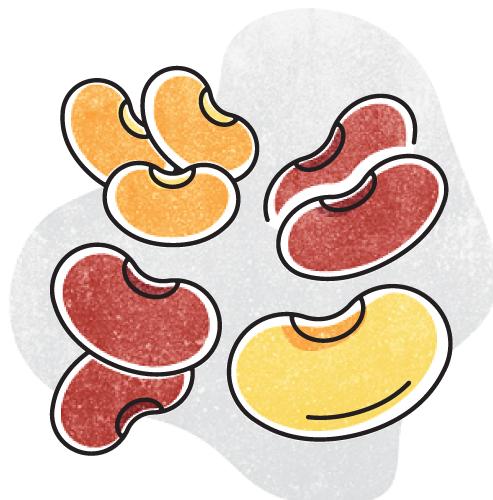
That includes mental and cardiovascular health and energy levels.

“If your gut’s not right, you probably don’t have the best day,” she said. “It’s like the second brain.”

Foods good for the gastrointestinal system include minimally processed foods, whole grains and generally those with a plant-based profile. Here are some you probably already have in your fridge, or are otherwise lower-cost options.

Beans

Not getting enough fiber is a key culprit for less-than-ideal gut health, say nutritionists — and the vast majority of Americans don’t get [the recommended amount of daily fiber of 30 grams](#).



(Illustrations by Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette)

“We talk a lot about protein, but the key to good gut health is consuming fiber on a regular basis,” said Natalie Gentile, family medicine physician and cofounder of Direct Care Physicians of Pittsburgh.

Beans are a great source of both protein and fiber, which improves gut motility and supplies food for our gut bacteria. Beans are also inexpensive — often under \$1 a can — and are shelf stable, canned or dry.

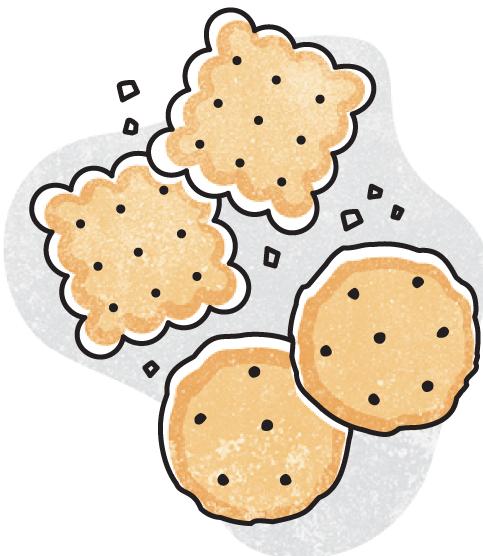
Beans with the highest fiber content include kidney and navy, at 8 grams and 6½ grams of fiber per half cup, respectively. Cook them into chili, roll them into burritos, or blend them into hummus with olive oil and lemon.

For those who have trouble tolerating beans due to high fiber content, “start low and go slow,” said Gentile.

“Fiber is going to promote a more diverse microbiome with a healthier gut flora,” said Carolyn Newberry, assistant professor of medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College and a clinical gastroenterologist specializing in nutrition and obesity science.

Whole grains

Those with gluten allergies notwithstanding, it’s essential to get unprocessed whole grains in the diet. Start your day with a whole grain, said Siebart, whether it’s a fortified cereal, granola or oatmeal. Get a tube of old-fashioned oats, which lasts 12 servings, at Target for \$3.79.



Like beans, whole grains are also high in fiber, can regulate blood pressure and help you feel full longer.

And when it comes to snacking, swapping chips for crackers can be one way to sneak fiber in. Wheat Thins now carry whole grain versions of its crackers for under \$4 a box.

Pickles and other fermented foods

Fermented products provide food for gut bacteria and help diversify their ecosystem. Refrigerated pickles, sauerkraut, kimchi and yogurt with added cultures all can be a great addition.



Keep an eye out, though, for added sugars in fermented products.

“Sweeteners may counteract the positive health benefits you’re seeking,” said Newberry.

Kombucha, yogurt and bread and butter pickles all tend to have added sugars. Instead, try plain Fage or Siggi’s yogurt (generally \$2 or less per 5.3-ounce container), or Vlasic Kosher Dill Spear pickles with zero added sugar and no high fructose corn syrup for \$3 a jar.

Good fruits

Berries contain polyphenols, or naturally occurring compounds with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.



“Anything with a bright color probably has a polyphenol in it,” said Kirsten Jackson, a U.K.-based dietitian specializing in irritable bowel syndrome.

Nutritionists interviewed for this story all encouraged “eating the rainbow” over restrictive diets and calorie counting. Adding color to your plate is an easy sign you’re getting plenty of vitamins, minerals and variety to promote diversity in the gut.

“It’s so simple,” said Siebart. “Eat a variety of colors. We grew up counting calories, and I think that did more harm than good. If you want to count something, count colors. Each color provides something. It doesn’t have to be a rainbow at every meal.”

Frozen fruit can also be a sustainable and cheaper way to add color to your diet without a ticking clock of those browning bananas. Gentile keeps frozen fruit as a staple to add to oatmeal, smoothies or yogurt. A medley bag of frozen fruit from Giant Eagle is about \$5.

Jackson also recommends kiwi fruit, because it contains non-fermenting fiber; in other words, those with more sensitive guts can worry less about gas and bloating.

“This is not some fancy fruit,” said Jackson. “You can eat it with the skin on, and it can be a great on-the-go snack.”

And if you’re not in a place to buy organic, fear not — that doesn’t matter as much as you might think. Organic produce still has the same nutrient profile as its generic counterparts, and if the cost is preventive to eating fruits and veggies at all, it’s better to buy the nonorganic apple.

Extra virgin olive oil

Another key source of those anti-inflammatory polyphenols: [extra virgin olive oil](#).



A good bottle of olive oil has healthy omegas and unsaturated fats that give us energy and help us absorb vitamins. Cook with it, drizzle it on salads or replace butter in baked goods.

“This should be a staple in anyone’s home,” said Jackson. “It’s great for overall health.”

Olive oil prices vary depending on the quality, but you can get a 16.9-ounce bottle of either extra virgin or real for less than \$7 at Aldi.

The bottom line

“When we think about generalized gut health, it’s going to be different for everyone,” said Newberry. “The data really supports eating more unprocessed foods.”



Even small changes can make a big difference for health. Pack a lunch for work every other day instead of going out. Swap water, tea or sparkling water for soda one or two days a week, or get an apple as a side one day instead of fries.

“It’s not an all-or-nothing thing,” she said. “It’s unrealistic to think people are never going to eat processed foods. It’s more about increasing the frequency of eating unprocessed foods.”

And no need to max out your credit card on health-store foods you don’t like the taste of.

“You do you,” said Siebart. “The majority of the time, send down something healthy. Your gut will thank you. It’s never too late to start.”

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Hanna Webster has covered health for the Post-Gazette since 2022, specializing in health equity and the opioid crisis. She holds a master’s degree in science writing from Johns Hopkins University.

✉ hwebster@post-gazette.com

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