

EATING FOR YOUR MICROBIOME

A **microbe**, or microscopic organism, is a living thing that is too small to be seen with the naked eye. This general term is used to describe bacteria, fungi, yeast, and viruses, to name a few. A **microbiome** is the collection of the microbes living in a given community, like the intestines in the human body. We also sometimes refer to these communities as “flora” or “microbiota”.

As humans, we begin to build our microbiome the moment we are born. How and where we’re born play a big role in the types of microbes we acquire. Babies first pick up microbes through a vaginal birth, then from every person or thing they touch, and they continue to pick up microbes throughout their lives. The microbiome isn’t fixed; it develops over time and changes in response to its environment.

What Does the Microbiome Do?

Gut bacteria affect the entire body, including the brain. The beneficial bacteria in the gut have many functions, including the ability to synthesize some vitamins, help with digestion, balance mood, reduce anxiety, and protect against infections and some forms of cancer. Strains of good bacteria in the gut are also associated with lower rates of obesity, diabetes, and various digestive tract diseases.

If there are too many bad bacteria or too few good bacteria in the microbiome, serious health problems can arise. The population of good bacteria in your body can be inhibited or killed by stress, surgery, illness, trauma, or unhealthy eating habits. Antibiotics can kill bad bacteria that cause disease, but they also kill off many of the beneficial microbes. We can keep our microbiomes healthy by eating foods that feed the good bacteria, and avoiding foods that encourage the growth of bad bacteria.

Feeding the Microbiome

The foods we eat have a big influence on our microbiomes. Many microbes in our guts help us extract nutrients from food we wouldn’t otherwise be able to digest. Different microbes thrive on different types of food. You can promote the growth of good bacteria (also known as **probiotics**) in your gut by eating foods the bacteria are known to thrive on. These foods are known as **prebiotics**, and they include a variety of fiber-rich foods.

Tips for Maintaining a Healthy Microbiome

- Eat a wide variety of fiber-rich plant foods, including legumes, nuts, seeds, herbs, whole grains, fruits, and especially vegetables.
- Limit or avoid red meat, processed foods, and foods high in added sugar and artificial sweeteners.
- Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of plain water and other non-caffeinated, unsweetened beverages.
- Limit or avoid any foods to which you are sensitive, intolerant, or allergic. Some common examples are corn, dairy, eggs, fish and shellfish, peanuts, soy, tree nuts, and wheat (gluten).
- Include both prebiotic and probiotic foods in your diet. For more information, ask your functional medicine practitioner for **IFM’s Probiotic and Prebiotic Foods** document.
- Take antibiotics only when medically necessary. During and after completing a course of antibiotics, eat probiotic foods and take a probiotic supplement. This can help rebuild the population of healthy bacteria in your gut.

References

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