

By Dr TEE E SIONG & Assoc Prof Dr RAJA AFFENDI RAJA ALI

WHEN it comes to one's overall health, good gut health is crucial.

As one of the largest organs in the human body, the gut (also called the gastrointestinal [GI] tract), has to perform several major tasks.

Its main task is to digest food to provide you with energy and nutrients.

By extension, it's also in charge of disposing the "leftovers" from both digested and non-digested foods.

Another critical role the gut plays is as a major part of your immune system.

However, a lesser known fact about the gut is that it is home to trillions of microorganisms (also known as gut microbiota), all of which contribute to good gut health and your overall wellbeing.

What are gut microbiota?

Gut microbiota are the microorganisms that make their home in your digestive ecosystem.

This population consists of both "good" and "bad" bacteria. A healthy digestive gut would typically have a balance of about 85% good bacteria against 15% bad bacteria.

I've heard the term probiotics. What is it?

Probiotics are living microorganisms, mostly bacteria that provide health benefits to humans when consumed in adequate amounts.

Also recognised as good bacteria, probiotics have been shown to be able to keep you gut healthy.

In view of this, probiotics have been incorporated into several food products, and are even available in the form of dietary supplements.

Some common probiotics in the market are bacteria in the *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* families.

Is there any law in this country that regulates the sale of probiotics?

Yes, the Health Ministry (MOH) has enacted a law that spells out specific requirements for products to be recognised as "probiotic cultures".

These include the particular type and number of bacteria that are recognised. The law permits the

That's a good gut

Getting to know probiotics and its health benefits.



The gastrointestinal system also plays a major role in the immune system. — 123rf.com

addition of probiotic cultures to food and allows that food to be labelled as containing "probiotics" or "probiotic cultures".

As a savvy consumer, you can correctly identify genuine probiotics products by reading the label.

Where can I find probiotic foods?

Some common probiotic foods include cultured and fermented milk products that have probiotic cultures, e.g. cultured milk drinks, fermented milk products, yoghurt, cultured cream or sour cream.

What should I look for when choosing cultured milk drinks with probiotics?

There are five main points to be aware of.

1. Check the label for the words "probiotic cultures".
2. It should also specify that the cultures are alive or viable.

3. The genus, species and strain of probiotics used in the product (only certain strains have been approved by MOH).

4. The quantity of probiotic cultures present in the food product must be clearly stated (it must contain a minimum of 10^6 cfu/ml or cfu/g; CFU is short for colony forming units, a measure of the number of microorganisms).

5. Directions for storage before and after (if applicable) the package is opened.

Are there other food sources of probiotics?

Traditional fermented foods are usually home-made, and the types and number of bacteria are usually not well characterised and standardised. As such, they may not meet the criteria stipulated by MOH for probiotics.

Nevertheless, they are potential sources of beneficial bacteria.



Potential sources of beneficial bacteria in foods include fermented foods such as tempeh, homemade yoghurt, kimchi and tapai.

Some examples of such fermented foods include tempeh, homemade yoghurt, kimchi and tapai.

What about probiotic supplements?

Probiotic supplements exist and are commonly found in either powdered or pill form. Do ensure that you follow the instructions on the product label when it comes to proper dosage and frequency of consumption in order to maximise the effectiveness of the probiotic.

Remember to check the product's label to find out which probiotic genus and species (e.g. *Lactobacillus casei*) it contains and its CFU count.

If in doubt, consult a pharmacist or a healthcare professional before buying.

How do probiotics contribute to overall health and wellbeing?

Probiotics have been demonstrated to bring about several beneficial health effects.

Current evidence supports the role of probiotics in tackling a broad range of digestive system problems.

Certain probiotics have been found to be effective in improving symptoms of patients with irritable bowel syndrome, diarrhoea (which

includes traveller's diarrhoea, antibiotic-associated diarrhoea, and acute infectious diarrhoea), constipation and certain type of inflammatory bowel diseases.

There is also emerging evidence that probiotics can positively influence immunity.

In addition, there is on-going research on the potential role of probiotics in positively influencing a person's mental health or mood.

What are some of the factors that may affect the effectiveness of probiotics?

It has been established that the effectiveness of probiotics can be significantly influenced by many factors, such as the species and strain, the formulation or mixture, the dosage taken, and the duration of consumption.

Holistic approach

While probiotics are an important component of good gut health, one should not rely solely on it.

There are other lifestyle aspects that are also important for ensuring good gut health, such as consuming a balanced and varied diet high in dietary fibres.

Some of the do's and don'ts include:

- Do practise balance, moderation and variety in your daily diet.
- Do include foods rich in fibre.
- Do drink plenty of water.
- Do be more physically active.
- Do get enough sleep.
- Don't eat too much fried foods.
- Don't take too much salt and sugar.

Dr Tee E Siong is a nutritionist and president of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM). Assoc Prof Dr Raja Affendi Raja Ali is a consultant physician and gastroenterologist at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Medical Centre. This article is contributed by Probiotics Education Programme (PEP) by the NSM. To obtain more information on the activities of the PEP, visit www.nutriweb.org.my/probiotics.