

Eat, Drink, and Stay Merry

How to keep your gut out of a rut

'Tis the season for sampling a little of this and a little of that, and overindulging in all of the rich, fatty foods we try to avoid for most of the year. If only we didn't have to digest everything we put in our mouths!

An estimated 40 percent of the population experiences digestive stress, including gas, bloating, diarrhea, constipation, cramps, reflux, or heartburn. And that's on a typical day—never mind a holiday!

What's the best way to support digestion during December and beyond? Two popular options are probiotics and digestive enzymes. Bacteria that promote health, probiotics are living organisms. Enzymes are proteins that work to regulate reactions in the body. Both are available in foods and in supplements.

Befriend bacteria

Sometimes called “good bacteria” or “friendly bacteria,” probiotics are necessary for proper digestion and absorption of food and nutrients. They're also critical to the immune-system development and to protecting against disease-causing microorganisms.

You'll find them in the form of tablets, capsules, and powders, and in food such as yogurt, miso, tempeh, and some beverages.

The average digestive system hosts over 500 strains of bacteria, most of them being the friendly kind. But sometimes the good bacteria/bad bacteria balance teeters toward the bad side, especially if you're taking antibiotics (which kill the good bugs along with the bad) or are dealing with unfriendly microorganisms like yeasts, fungi, and parasites.

Researchers have reported encouraging results in the use of probiotics to treat diarrhea, irritable bowel syndrome, and other conditions. Select a probiotic that's made by a reputable company. Take it in a form that's appealing and workable for you. Protect the product from heat, moisture, and air to prevent spoiling.

Enlist enzymes

Catalysts that speed up chemical reactions, enzymes are made of amino acids and do their work all along the digestive tract—starting in your mouth.

When we eat, our bodies produce enzymes, but these can weaken in quantity and in strength as we age—and that can lead to digestive problems. Supplemental enzymes help boost the body's ability to convert food into nutrients. The suffix “-ase” tacked onto the name of a food component designates it as an enzyme that helps break down that specific nutrient. For example, protease is an enzyme that helps digest proteins, lipase breaks down fats (or lipids), and cellulase is an enzyme that works on cellulose, the fiber in fruits and veggies.

If you're lactose intolerant, it means your body can't produce the enzyme lactase, which processes milk sugar. To compensate, you can drink milk to which lactase has been added or take lactase in supplement form. Also consider consuming foods such as yogurt that contain lactobacillus bacteria, which produce lactase.

If you suspect you have a digestive disorder, talk with your healthcare practitioner. She can make a diagnosis and talk with you about the safety and efficacy of supplemental enzymes.

Supplemental enzymes boost the body's ability to convert food into nutrients.

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