

# 5 Ways to Renew Your Microbiota in the New Year

The holiday season may be the most wonderful time of the year, but all the feasting, celebrating, and stress that come with it aren't so joyful for your gut. The trillions of friendly bacteria and other microbes in your digestive tract (collectively known as your gastrointestinal microbiota) are sensitive to changes in your diet and lifestyle, and the holidays can take a toll. Chances are that your microbiota and your microbiome (the collective genomes of your microbiota) can use a little (or a lot) of TLC in the New Year.

## Steps to Get Your Gut Healthy After the Holidays

There's a reason many people ring in the New Year with a cold, the flu, or stomach troubles. Even short periods of stress, lack of sleep or exercise, and indulging in excessive sugar and alcohol can affect your health. All these can cause changes in your microbiota, leading to a less diverse mix of microbes. With less diversity you can have fewer types of beneficial bacteria in your gut. That may allow potentially harmful bacteria, viruses, and yeasts to grow. Researchers believe a more diverse mix of microbes is a good indicator of a healthy gut.<sup>1</sup>

Besides keeping less-desirable microbes in check, your gut's friendly bacteria are vital for making certain vitamins, helping with digestion, keeping the lining of your large intestine healthy, and supporting your immune system.<sup>1,2</sup> So an imbalance in your gut has far-reaching consequences throughout your body.

The good news is with these positive changes to your diet and lifestyle, you can restore your microbiota and its microbiome and support your health in the new year.

## Make quality sleep a priority.

Aim for eight hours of restful sleep each night. Disruptions in your circadian rhythm (your natural sleep-wake cycle) can cause an imbalance in your microbiota, worsen GI symptoms, and stress your immune system. A few late nights or cross-country travel can easily affect your health.

To improve your sleep quality, try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day. And turn off your phone, computer, reading tablet, and TV at least 30 minutes before bedtime to quiet your mind and limit blue light exposure. That can help you fall asleep faster and stay asleep.

## Prioritize relaxation and self-care

Chronic stress increases inflammation throughout your body and impairs digestion and gut health. It's also a leading reason for poor sleep quality. Long periods of stress are linked to a

less diverse microbiota.<sup>3</sup> So there's no better time than the start of a new year to prioritize self-care and your mental health.

Finding a practice that works for you to support relaxation and calm throughout the day is crucial. Try a variety of mindfulness programs like yoga, tai chi, or meditation. And aim for at least 30 minutes of movement each day, ideally outside in nature. Keep trying different forms of self-care until you find what works best for you, and don't be afraid to ask for help from your healthcare provider if you need it.

#### Cut out problem foods

Food intolerances or sensitivities can disrupt your microbiota, causing digestive problems.<sup>1</sup> And they're more common than you might think. Food sensitivities can also trigger non-GI symptoms like headaches, mood problems, or skin rashes.

Problem foods might not be obvious until you start looking for them. Keep a food and symptom journal for a few weeks. Write down everything you eat, and note how you feel after eating certain foods, especially those containing gluten or dairy. Then, eliminate those foods for a week and note if symptoms improve.

You can also work with a knowledgeable healthcare provider to get food allergy, food sensitivity, gut dysbiosis, and SIBO testing performed. They can also help you with an elimination diet and guide you on good foods to substitute.

#### Eat a microbiome-friendly diet

Your diet affects your microbiota and microbiome more than almost anything else. So, a good goal for the new year is to focus on feeding your microbiota properly. Making positive diet changes can quickly improve your microbiome diversity, but it's important to stick with them.<sup>1</sup>

Your friendly microbes will thrive and flourish on a whole foods diet rich in fruits, vegetables, unprocessed whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The fiber in these plant foods fuels the beneficial bacteria in your gut. Add in healthy fats from cold water fish, olive oil, nuts, seeds, and avocados to help reduce inflammation in your GI tract and throughout your body. And incorporate cultured and fermented foods like yogurt, kefir, or sauerkraut. The live bacteria and yeasts in these foods can add to the collection of beneficial microbes in your gut.

You should also be aware that certain foods promote inflammation and disrupt your microbiota.<sup>3</sup> Try to limit these foods as much as possible:

- Caffeinated products like regular coffee, tea, and colas.
- Alcohol.
- Foods and beverages with added sugar, like sweetened soft drinks, sugary cereals, desserts, and ice cream.
- Foods and drinks made with artificial sweeteners.

- Highly processed, packaged snacks and meals. These tend to be high in unhealthy fats, refined carbohydrates, and added sugar.

#### Take a good probiotic

Probiotics contain some of the same live microorganisms found in a healthy gut microbiota. They have health benefits when you consume them in adequate amounts.<sup>3</sup> Taking a probiotic daily can add to your beneficial microbes and help rebuild your microbiome. That may be especially helpful if your gut health needs a boost after those holiday festivities.

Some probiotic formulas are paired with a prebiotic, like inulin or Sunfiber®. Prebiotics are fiber and other compounds that help feed probiotics. Ask your healthcare provider if a probiotic-prebiotic formula (known as a synbiotic) is a good choice for you.

There's no better time than the start of a new year to clean the slate and start making long-term healthy diet and lifestyle changes to support your gut. Work on these changes little by little; before long, your gut will thank you with a healthier, more diverse microbiota and microbiome.

#### REFERENCES:

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