

Effective Ways to Support Teen Gut Health

Teenagers experience significant changes to their bodies and brains within a short time. Hormonal changes, growth spurts, school stress, and social pressures challenge their bodies, brains, and the beneficial bacteria in their gut.

The gut microbiota influences immune, digestive, metabolic, and mental health, but it can be disturbed by a poor diet, lack of sleep, and emotional anxiety — stressors teens commonly face. These tips can help support a teen’s gut health and provide a solid foundation for optimal health.

Foods to Support Teens’ Gut Health

Incorporating more of these foods can help promote a rich, diverse gut microbiota, which is associated with good health.¹

High fiber foods

Many high-fiber plant foods contain prebiotics, compounds that help feed our helpful gut microbes and stimulate their activity. Teen girls should aim for 25 grams of fiber, and boys 31 grams each day by choosing six to seven daily servings of high-fiber foods like these²:

- Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables (underripe bananas, asparagus, onions, and jicama are top sources of prebiotics)
- Oatmeal or shredded wheat
- Quinoa or brown rice
- 100% whole grain bread, English muffins, or wraps
- Chickpeas, lentils, black, kidney, or pinto beans
- Any type of nuts
- Sunflower, pumpkin, chia, flax, and hemp seeds

Cultured and fermented foods

Cultured and fermented foods contain live beneficial bacteria, termed “probiotics”, that add to the gut microbiota. Check the labels to ensure they contain “live and active cultures.”

- Regular or Greek yogurt
- Unsweetened kefir (a yogurt drink — add it to a smoothie)
- Cultured cottage cheese
- Miso
- Kimchi
- Sauerkraut
- Fermented pickles or other vegetables (look for these in the refrigerated section)
- Kombucha

Eat Less of These Foods

A Western-style diet with lots of sugar, unhealthy fats, meat, and highly processed foods is associated with less microbial diversity, increased chronic disease risk, and worse health outcomes.¹ Encourage teens to eat a nutritious, whole-food diet by involving them in meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking. Limit these foods to occasional treats instead of eating them daily:

- Fast food like burgers, fries, chicken fingers, and pizza. Choose a salad with protein, a wrap, or soup instead.
- Packaged salty and sweet snacks, like chips and cookies. Keep cut vegetables, fruit, hummus, and sweet or savory Greek yogurt dip on hand for snacks.
- Desserts and sweets. Substitute fresh or dried fruit or make chia puddings for a sweet treat.
- Sugary and artificially sweetened beverages, like soft drinks, teas, sweetened coffee drinks, energy, and sports drinks. Sip water or unsweetened herbal tea throughout the day and save sports drinks for sports and long workouts.

Lifestyle Strategies for a Balanced Microbiota

- Prioritize sleep. Teens need eight to ten hours of sleep each night, but most get far less.³ Turn off blue-light-emitting devices like phones, computers, and the television at least one hour before bedtime. Aim to go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day (including weekends). Adding a [magnesium supplement](#) in the evening may promote relaxation and support improved sleep.⁴
- Aim for daily physical activity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that teens get at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily.⁵ Exercise is vital for long-term health, weight management, brain and gut health. Teens who are active when young are more likely to remain active as adults.
- Avoid exposure to toxins such as cigarette smoke, vaping, alcohol, and illicit drugs. Not only are these dangerous, but they also harm a teen's brain, body, and microbiota. Talk to your teen about the long-term harmful effects of these substances and ways to avoid peer pressure. Set a good example by promoting positive behaviors at home.
- Practice stress-moderating activities each day. Spending time outdoors in nature, practicing yoga, mindfulness meditation, journaling, and working with a behavioral health therapist, if necessary, can all help teens manage stress and anxiety.
- To ensure your teen gets consistent amounts of probiotics, consider adding a [probiotic supplement](#) daily. You can also add [probiotic powders](#) to food and beverages that don't require cooking. Note that heat destroys the live cultures.

References

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2. Fiber (For Teens). Nemours Teens Health. Reviewed May 2022. Accessed February 20, 2024. <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/fiber.html?ref=search>
3. Sleep in Middle and High School Students. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Reviewed September 10, 2020. Accessed February 20, 2024. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/features/students-sleep.htm>
4. Zhang Y, Chen C, Lu L, et al. Association of Magnesium Intake With Sleep Duration and Sleep Quality: Findings From the CARDIA Study. *Sleep*. 2022;45(4) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34883514/>
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Prebiotic and Probiotic-Rich Recipes for Teens

Chocolate Almond & Banana Smoothie

1 frozen banana (slightly thawed)
1 handful of baby spinach
2 tablespoons almond butter
2 teaspoons unsweetened cocoa powder
8 ounces unsweetened kefir

Optional: 1/8 teaspoon [Ther-Biotic® Complete Powder](#)

Combine the ingredients in a blender jar and blend until smooth. Add more kefir or water for a thinner consistency.

Blueberry Overnight Oats

Double or triple this recipe and portion it into individual jars for a grab-and-go breakfast or afternoon snack.

¾ cup frozen blueberries
½ cup old-fashioned oats
½ cup milk (any kind)
½ cup plain Greek yogurt
1 tablespoon chia seeds
1 tablespoon honey or maple syrup (or to taste)
2 tablespoons chopped nuts (any kind)

Optional: 1/8 teaspoon [Ther-Biotic® Complete Powder](#)

- Add the frozen blueberries to the bottom of a 16-ounce mason jar or other container with a lid.
- In a small mixing bowl, combine the oats, milk, yogurt, chia seeds, sweetener, and probiotic powder if using.
- Stir to combine and pour this mixture over the blueberries.
- Sprinkle the nuts on top.
- Cover the jar or container and refrigerate it overnight or for up to four days.