

► Heal Your Gut, Heal Your Body

Maintaining the proper gut flora balance can heal the body and mind, improving physical and emotional health

By Christine M. Okezie, CHHC



*Christine M. Okezie,
Certified Holistic Health
Counselor and Natural
Foods Chef, [www.
yourdeliciousbalance.com](http://www.yourdeliciousbalance.com)*

WHEN IT COMES TO OPTIMIZING our health, we cannot over-emphasize the importance of a healthy gut. Hippocrates said, “All disease begins in the gut,” and if we want better immunity, improved digestion and better mental clarity, we need to put our focus on rebuilding our gastrointestinal health.

There is an explosion of research happening that suggests restoring gut health will be one of the key drivers of 21st century medicine. It’s amazing how supporting this highly sophisticated and integral system can help us resolve chronic health issues like fatigue, brain fog, frequent colds and joint pain, just to name a few.

Our gut is home to about 100 trillion bacteria that digest our food, regulate our hormones, eliminate toxins and produce key nutrients. That’s more than 10 times the number of cells in the entire human body, making us an amazing walking ecosystem. With over 400 species of these bugs in our gut, our health depends on maintaining the critical balance between the good intestinal bacteria and the harmful bacteria.

In a healthy gut, there are around 85 percent of the good guys and 15 percent of the bad. When this is the case, we feel



strong and vital, rarely get sick, have efficient digestion and life is good. The beneficial bacteria help ensure adequate production of enzymes to digest our food, aid in nutrient assimilation, produce disease fighting substances and make essential vitamins. Healthy bacteria even affect our cholesterol balance and the metabolism of fat and sugar in our bodies.

Also, 75 percent of our immune system originates in our digestive tract, due to gut associated lymphoid tissue (GALT), which are particular strains of bacteria with specialized immune cells that attack harmful invaders. These cells form bundles known as Peyer's Patches, which work together to protect the mucous membranes of the small intestines from infection. If we spread it out, this lining would take up a surface area the size of a tennis court.

However, when the bad bacteria like parasites and yeast dominate, all bodily systems are affected, which can lead to a variety of health challenges, such as food allergies, weight gain, constipation, candida overgrowth, joint pain, headaches, depression, autoimmunity and more. Living with a malfunctioning gut leads to further erosion of our health, and ultimately, full-blown disease. Mounting scientific evidence shows that how we nurture this masterfully designed intestinal ecosystem can mean the difference

between preventing or promoting a wide range of disease conditions, including inflammatory bowel disease, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, autism and cancer.

Additionally, as the prevalence of metabolic diseases continues to increase, a growing body of research now suggests some of these physiological changes might have deep roots in the gut. Studies have linked changes in bacterial composition to health problems, including Crohn's disease and obesity. Moreover, many scientists are suggesting that chronic inflammation, widely accepted as the underlying cause of modern diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer, may begin with poor gut immunity.

SIGNS OF IMBALANCE

There are several signs and symptoms that indicate an imbalance in the flora of your gut, including:

- Gas and bloating
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Weight gain and obesity
- Hypoglycemia
- Headaches, nausea
- Sugar cravings/carbohydrate cravings
- Chronic joint pain
- Allergies

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- Skin problems
- Frequent illness
- Depression or mood imbalance

The foods we eat are key drivers of this ratio of good to bad bacteria, so the number one thing we can do to heal our gut is to simply avoid or minimize certain foods that feed the pathogenic bacteria in order to keep them under control. Foods to avoid or minimize include:

- Sugar
- Refined carbohydrates
- Processed junk foods
- Excess animal protein

Eating a whole, plant-centered, nutrient-dense diet is the number one way to support our good gut bacteria. We can also use traditionally lacto-fermented foods to heal our gut. These contain live cultures, and help fortify and rebuild healthy gut bacteria. If fermented foods are not part of your diet, taking a probiotic supplement is strongly recommended. Some examples of fermented foods include:

- Yogurt
- Coconut kefir
- Sauerkraut
- Kimchi
- Miso
- Tempeh
- Kombucha tea

There are also other factors contributing to a gut imbalance, including prescription drugs, antibiotics (including those used in conventional meat production), agricultural chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and pollution. Medications, especially antibiotics and antacids, wipe out your gut flora indiscriminately, which sets the stage for pathogenic bacteria to grow out of control. While some environmental factors are difficult to control, simply upgrading your food choices to organic can make a significant impact. This switch alone will not only limit your consumption



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Maintaining Gut Balance

There is not health without a healthy gut. Here are some tips for keeping the 100 trillion bacteria in the gut in balance.

- Avoid refined sugar and processed carbohydrates
- Decrease chronic stress, which can kill friendly flora
- Eat cultured and lacto-fermented foods
- Eat fiber-rich, whole plant foods, especially dark leafy greens
- Eat a balance of raw (enzyme-rich) and cooked whole plant foods

of sugar and food toxins, but also decrease exposure to agricultural chemicals and antibiotics.

THE MIND CONNECTION

Most don't realize it, but we actually have two brains, meaning our gut actually has a mind of its own. There is a huge neurological component to our gut, which is why it's often called our second brain — our Gut Brain. Known as the enteric nervous system, our gut

has over 100 million neurons that line the intestinal wall. These neurons constantly carry critical messages between our gut and the brain in our head and when those messages are interfered with in any way, our health will suffer. In short,

Recipe:

Kale Salad with Miso Tahini Dressing

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 1 bunch of kale, thinly sliced
- 3 carrots, shredded (approximately 1½ cups)
- 1 ripe avocado, diced
- 1 small red onion, sliced
- 1 tablespoon chia seeds

Dressing:

- ¼ cup raw sesame tahini
- 2 tablespoons sweet white miso paste
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon raw honey
- 1 small garlic clove, minced

½ cup water (more or less to desired consistency)

Procedure:

1. In a blender or a container with lid, combine all dressing ingredients and blend well until smooth.
2. Add the finely shredded kale leaves and use your hands to mix the salad, making sure all the leaves are well-coated. Add the carrots and onion, and let sit for about 10-15 minutes until the oil is absorbed and the kale softens and wilts in size.
3. Gently fold in avocado and sprinkle in chia seeds.
4. Let sit for about 10-15 minutes to soften kale.



the gut and the brain work in tandem, each influencing the other.

Chemicals produced in the gut affect our brain, influencing mood and emotions. At the same time, stress and anxiety signaled by the brain can have a serious effect on digestive function. Scientists are exploring these two intricately related nervous systems in a growing new field called neurogastroenterology. Traditional systems of medicine, like Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, have always recognized emotions, psychology and physiology are one in the same, but the bottom line is, our mental health affects our gut and vice versa.

Mischief in our gut can cause disturbance in our brain, which is why when we restore our gut health, our mood, behavior and cognition all improve. In fact, 95 percent of the body's serotonin, the neurotransmitter that regulates mood, sleep, anxiety, depression and more, is actually produced not in your head, but in your gut. And in the same vein, chronic stress, unresolved emotions and even emotional trauma can wreak

havoc on your gut health by affecting that ratio of good to bad bacteria. Research suggests chronic stress plays an important role in the development of a variety of gastrointestinal diseases like Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Inflammatory Bowel Disease, Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease, and even food allergies. So finding ways to reduce stress is the other essential piece in ensuring a healthy gut.

ABOUT CHRISTINE M. OKEZIE

Christine M. Okezie is a graduate of the Natural Gourmet Institute for Health and Culinary Arts in New York, and the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. She founded her company, Your Delicious Balance, to counsel individuals to heal themselves through real food and positive lifestyle choices. Her healing strategies are based on whole foods nutrition, and she guides her clients to adopt a plant-centered way of eating that offers anti-inflammatory and detoxifying benefits to the body. For more information, visit her Web site at www.yourdeliciousbalance.com or call (201) 889-5001. EE