



Food Sensitivities: 10 Best & Worst Foods for Your Tummy

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Gas, stomach aches, constipation and diarrhea are common signs your digestive system is off-kilter. But did you know that brittle hair and low energy can also point to tummy troubles? Find out which foods will keep your gut clogged or moving. Plus, test your yogurt IQ with our quiz...

A healthy digestive system begins with a good diet. Eat the right stuff and improve digestion. Eat badly and you feel like a human garbage can. How you eat can affect the way you feel too.

"If you don't digest your food properly, your cells don't get what they need to function optimally," says Liz Lipski, Ph.D., a clinical dietitian and author of *Digestive Wellness* (McGraw-Hill).

The gastrointestinal (GI) tract is also home to our most precious disease-fighting resource: the immune system.

"Two-thirds of the immune system is in the digestive tract," Lipski says. "There are more neurotransmitters in the GI than in the brain and more nerve endings than in the spine," she adds.

Your digestive system is vital to your health and happiness. So how do you keep it working well? For starters, avoid these 5 gut enemies:

5 Worst Foods for Your Gut

1. Red meat

The more red meat you eat, the higher your risk of colorectal cancer risk. That's because it's typically high in saturated fat, which is tied to cancer of the small intestine, according to a 2008 *Cancer Research* study.

How to avoid it: Choose lean cuts of beef, lamb and pork. Eat more protein- and iron-rich legumes in place of red meat. Grill a Portobello mushroom instead of a burger; it's meaty flavor will fill you.

2. Processed meat

Lunch meats, hot dogs, sausages and other processed meats are packed with saturated fat, sodium and nitrates. Processed meats have been linked to colon cancer, possibly because they are cooked at high temperatures, which can increase carcinogens.

How to avoid it: Stick to fresh, lean cuts and eat other forms of protein (legumes and grains) as much as possible.

3. Hydrogenated oils

Trans fats, created when liquid oils are hydrogenated (so they become solid at room temperature), aren't found in nature. They're an inexpensive way to make fats last longer on supermarket shelves, but your body pays a high price: They're tough to digest and have been linked to many health problems, including increased bad (LDL) cholesterol, decreased good (HDL) cholesterol and colon cancer.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires trans fats to be labeled on food products. But the federal agency also allows manufacturers to claim zero trans fats if there are fewer than 0.5 grams per serving.

Don't be fooled: If a food lists hydrogenated oils as an ingredient, it contains trans fats.

How to avoid it: Get nutrients in foods that are fresh, whole and natural, and ditch the packaged, processed stuff.

4. Gluten

About 2 million Americans suffer from gluten intolerance, says the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Gluten is a protein found in barley, rye, spelt, wheat and countless other foods such as processed meats, soy sauce, ice cream, cheese, cookies, pasta, ketchup, salad dressings and more.

Food sensitivities affect 10%-20% of us, and can cause lots of digestive complaints and stomach aches (gas, cramping, bloating, heartburn, indigestion) and other symptoms, including chronic headaches, aching joints and muscles, depression, concentration, memory problems and poor energy levels, Lipski says. **How to avoid it:** A gluten-free diet is the only solution to this food sensitivity; it's a challenge but possible.

5. Lactose

Another cause of stomach aches is lactose, the principal sugar found in milk. Lactose intolerance affects 30-50 million Americans, according to the NIH.

Avoiding milk will help, but you don't have to give up all dairy. Some lactose-intolerant people do fine with small amounts of milk.

How to avoid it: Drink lactose-free milk and eat cultured dairy products, like yogurt, which break down lactose. Aged cheeses (like Cheddar and Swiss) have less lactose and may be easier to digest.

5 Best Foods for Your Gut

1. Dietary fiber

Our Pick: Prunes

Fiber keeps things moving through your digestive system and out. Otherwise, your colon is stuck with toxins that can build up and cause major health problems.

Your body then begins reabsorbing toxins, hormones and other substances.

"If you don't have regular bowel movements, you're retaining wastes that your body has finished with," Lipski says. "It's like not moving a stinky garbage bag out of your kitchen."

A diet rich in fiber protects against colon cancer and cancers of the small intestine, according to a 2008 study in the journal *Gastroenterology*.

Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes are all packed with healthy fiber. But when it comes to staying regular, prunes, because of their mild laxative effect, is the go-to fruit. They're also a great source of energy, nutrition and disease-fighting phenolic compounds. **2. Probiotics**

Our Pick: Yogurt

Probiotics are those "good bugs" you hear health nuts raving about. Why would anyone willingly eat bacteria?

Because our intestinal flora is made up of trillions of good bacteria that aid in digestion and promote immunity and health. In fact, four pounds of our body weight comes from the bacteria that live in the digestive tract.

The No. 1 probiotic food is yogurt. Yes, it's a dairy product – the bane of millions of lactose intolerant people – but eating yogurt calms digestive complaints. That's because it contains live cultures, typically *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, that help lactose digestion.

When choosing a yogurt, make sure the cultures are listed as "live" or "active." Yogurts with added fiber are even better.

But steer clear of yogurts with a lot of sugar, which hurts digestive health because it feeds the bad bacteria in your GI tract. Plain, unsweetened yogurt is best. Add some fiber-rich berries or honey, which has prebiotic properties, if you need to sweeten it up.

3. Prebiotics

Our Pick: Lentils

Prebiotics are food for probiotics.

"Bacteria multiply very quickly but need food once they reach the intestines," Lipski says.

Prebiotics help good bacteria thrive while driving down the number of disease-producing bacteria trying to invade the digestive tract.

They also promote a more acidic intestinal environment, which helps the body absorb nutrients in food such as the minerals calcium, iron, zinc and magnesium.

Luckily, prebiotics are found in many of the foods we already eat.

Fructooligosaccharides (FOS) and inulin are two naturally occurring prebiotics in onions, garlic, leeks, legumes, bananas, asparagus, sunchokes (Jerusalem artichokes) and more.

Lentils, a legume, are a great natural source of prebiotics and dietary fiber. They're a good substitute for red meat because of their high protein and iron content. To help your body better use the iron in lentils, prepare them with a vitamin C-rich food such as tomatoes.

4. Gluten-free grains

Our Pick: Quinoa

Gluten – a protein found in grains such as wheat, barley and rye – isn't necessarily bad for you. But it does cause stomach aches for many people.

Because of genetics, about 30% of us poorly digest gluten-containing grains, Lipski says. But many people, regardless of family history, feel better when they stop eating them.

Expanding your grain repertoire is a good idea whether or not you're gluten intolerant. Quinoa (pronounced "keen-wah") is an excellent option. This gluten-free grain is a complete protein, meaning it provides all eight essential amino acids. It's also fiber-rich and bursting with minerals.

It cooks up like rice (two parts water to one part grain) and adds a unique texture (chewy yet crispy) to side salads, casseroles, soups and more.

5. Fermented foods

Our Pick: Sourdough

Sometimes your GI tract just needs a break. Fermented foods are the solution.

"Fermenting or culturing makes food more digestible by actually 'predigesting' it for you," Lipski

says. Fermenting also increases our absorption of the other nutrients in the food. Pickles, sauerkraut, kefir, miso, tempeh and Japanese tamari or soy sauce are all easy-to-digest fermented foods.

So is sourdough. It can sub in for wheat bread if you're sensitive to gluten. Sourdough breads *are* often made with wheat flour, but the fermentation weakens the gluten.

If you don't want wheat at all, many grocery stores offer 100% gluten-free sourdough.

Something to wash it all down

Don't forget the most essential "food" of all – water. Digestion can't occur without water, so be sure to drink eight 8-ounce glasses throughout the day