

# Your Guide to Optimising your Gut Health this Winter

Did you know that over 70% of our immune cells are located within our gut?

So, prioritising our gut health during the cold and flu season is essential! During the winter months we can forget to look after ourselves and as a result, our gut health can really suffer. High stress, poor sleep, lack of nutrition and lack of physical activity can lead to an imbalance within our microbiome which can not only exacerbate IBS but it can wreak havoc on our immune system too.

Below is our guide to optimising your gut health to give you the best chance at keeping well this winter.

## Manage those Winter Blues

With less hours of daylight, grey skies and cold weather, it's no wonder that winter puts a damper on our mood. We tend to hibernate, becoming less social during the winter months, which can take its toll on our mental wellbeing. Our brain and our gut are connected via the vagus nerve which sends signals in a bi-directional flow. Low mood, depression, anxiety and high stress exacerbate IBS symptoms and vice versa. Stress weakens our immune system and alters our microbiome resulting in dysbiosis (1). All in all, stress is the ultimate villain when it comes to gut health and immunity.

So what can you do this winter to beat those winter blues:

- Keep social and stay connected with friends and family
- Engage in activities that bring joy into your life e.g. art and crafts, baking, socialising, sports or reading.
- Go outside and see the daylight every day
- Try some relaxation techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, listening to calming music, mindfulness, yoga or lighting a few candles and taking a bath.
- Include light to moderate physical activity and ensure this is an activity you enjoy
- Reach out for professional support from a psychologist or counselor if you are struggling.



## Get your 8 Hours of Sleep

Research shows that poor sleep is correlated with greater IBS symptoms (2), and here's why. Firstly, lack of sleep increases inflammation and cortisol levels in the body, thus increasing stress. Furthermore, there is a powerful link between sleep deprivation and mood disorders such as depression (3) and we all know how poor mental health can wreak havoc on our gut health. Sleep also plays a crucial role in regulating hunger and fullness hormones, which control appetite and satiety. When you're sleep-deprived, these hormones can get out of whack, which can impact on the types of foods we choose to eat and directly impact on our gut health. Lastly, sleep deprivation can disrupt the balance of gut bacteria. This imbalance can contribute to digestive issues such as bloating, gas, and constipation. On the other hand, good sleep promotes proper digestion and absorption of nutrients, supporting a healthy gut.

Here are some tips to getting a good night's rest:

- Establish a regular sleep schedule and wind down with relaxing activities like reading, meditating, or taking a warm bath or hot shower.
- Make your sleep sanctuary cozy and inviting. Invest in a comfortable mattress, keep your room cool and dark, and minimise the use of blue light on devices 1-2 hours before sleeping.
- Avoid heavy meals and caffeine close to bedtime. Opt for gut-friendly foods like fiber-rich fruits and veggies, wholegrains, and lean proteins.
- Engaging in regular physical activity not only helps tire you out, but it also promotes better sleep quality. Avoid high impact workouts close to bedtime, as they can have the opposite effect.

## Aim for 30 Different Plants per Week

Research shows that those who eat 30 different types of plants per week have a more diverse gut microbiome (4). The more diverse our microbiome, the less likely we are to experience IBS type symptoms such as bloating, constipation, diarrhoea and stomach pain. Whilst, 30 may seem like a big number, it is very achievable if you make a conscious effort to eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grains, herbs and spices each day. Even black pepper counts!

Here are some tips on how you can boost your plant fibers:

- Include frozen and canned fruits and vegetables, especially during winter for a cost effective option.
- Flavour meals with herbs and spices. Hint: our spice mixes provide over 7 different fibres within one meal.
- Snack on nuts and seeds or add them to winter salads for extra crunch. Some low FODMAP options include walnuts, peanuts, almonds, pumpkin seeds, chia seeds, linseeds and sesame seeds.
- Include a variety of wholegrains at meals and snacks such as rice, quinoa, sourdough bread and oats.
- Add low FODMAP serves of legumes into meals for added fibre. E.g. lentils to mince dishes, chickpeas to curries and split peas to soups. Pro tip: rinse your canned legumes to wash off the FODMAPs that leach out into the brine before eating.



## Move your body

There are a few main reasons as to why physical activity is important for our gut health. Feel-good endorphins released during exercise, boost our mood and can be used as a stress management tool to improve mental health. When the mind is happy, the gut is happy too. Studies also show there is a direct beneficial effect exercise has on gut microbiome diversity (5)(6). A more diverse microbiome has flow on benefits such as reduced IBS symptoms and improved immunity. Finally, movement gets the gas and bowel contents moving along the digestive tract which can reduce constipation and relieve bloating.

Here are some tips to staying active this winter:

- Exercise doesn't have to be done at the gym, It could include gardening, dancing or playing with your kids.
- Join a group class such as dance, Pilates, boxing, or Zumba or see if there is a social sports team you could join. Social exercise can keep us accountable and is always more fun!
- Prioritise restorative movement to reduce stress and calm the gut. We love yoga and gentle walks for this.
- Limit strenuous exercise, especially when stressed or during an IBS flare up. This will only increase cortisol levels and exacerbate your IBS.

## Support your gut with probiotics

Probiotics are a great way to give your gut that little extra support it might need. We are big believers in always choosing food first for additional nutrients. Some probiotic rich foods include yoghurt (note coconut yoghurt often doesn't contain probiotics), miso paste, fermented foods and probiotic cheeses. We understand it's not always possible for everyone to eat these foods, in which case you may benefit from a probiotic supplement. The world of probiotics can be a confusing one, as there are many different strains, each designed for a different purpose so it is important you choose one that is specific to your needs. It often takes about 3-4 weeks to notice any difference after taking probiotics and they must be taken daily to have any effect.

Below are some examples of probiotic strains that may be beneficial in people with IBS:

- Lactobacillus Planetarium 299v
- Bifidobacterium (multiple strains)
- Escherichia coli Nissle 1917
- L. acidophilus NCFM
- L. paracasei NCC2461

Please note this is very generalised advice for individuals wanting to improve their gut health and for those suffering from IBS. If you would like more personalised advice, we recommend speaking to a dietitian. You can contact us for private dietitian consultations at [www.thefriendlyfoodco.nz](http://www.thefriendlyfoodco.nz)