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IS WINTER MESSING WITH YOUR GUT?

Small lifestyle changes as the cold sets in can have a big impact on digestive health

WORDS Sarah Marinos

Our gut could be one of the most underappreciated parts of our body.

It houses trillions of microbes (our gut microbiome) and plays a key role in our immune system, mental health and cardiovascular health, and may influence cancer risk and even our sleep.

During winter, our gut health can face challenges because of changes in our daily habits.

We tend to stay indoors more, exercise less and eat for comfort. All this can upset our gut microbiome, explains Deakin University

Food and Mood Centre research fellow Dr Amelia McGuinness.

"It's not winter directly that can change our gut health — it's the way we live," Dr McGuinness says.

"Heartier foods and moving less can influence our digestion, the diversity of microbes in our gut and our gut health.

"Because the gut and brain are closely connected, what we eat and how we look after our gut can also influence how we feel."

So, how can we look after our gut health this season?

UPGRADE YOUR COMFORT FOODS

When it's chilly, it's easy to crave richer foods such as roasts, curries, stews and desserts.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying comfort food — as long as we balance it with fibre-rich fruits, vegetables and legumes, says Perth-based food scientist and dietitian Dr Shy Vishnumohan.

"You don't need to cut out food, or detox. The biggest gut health shift in winter isn't necessarily what we add in; it's the fibre we accidentally leave out," Dr Vishnumohan says.

"When ultra-processed convenience foods start taking the

place of beans, wholegrains, fruits and vegetables, we can end up eating less of the fibre that our gut microbes rely on.

"The overall pattern, rather than any one ingredient alone, is often the bigger issue for gut health.

"Even eating one gut-friendly meal a day, like lentil soup, a bean stew or oats with yoghurt, can be a great place to start."

Associate Professor Emily Wright, a gastroenterologist at St Vincent's Private Hospital and the University of Melbourne, adds that too many ultra-processed foods and large amounts of animal protein may increase the amount of pro-inflammatory bacteria in the gut, which can have a negative impact on our health.

She says a good starting point for gut health is the Mediterranean diet, which is varied, rich in fibre, low in ultra-processed foods and prioritises plant foods.

KEEP MOVING

When it's cold outside, Netflix on the couch is way more appealing than going for a walk or to the gym.

But being inactive can slow our gut motility — how well the digestive system moves and functions.

Assoc Prof Wright notes that gut motility can decrease in winter, when people are often less motivated to stay active.

"This can affect our bowel function and cause constipation, bloating and discomfort," Assoc Prof Wright says.

So, what is a good movement goal to aim for? Think moderate exercise on most days.

Assoc Prof Wright says it doesn't have to be high-intensity exercise — a 30-minute walk on most days can help support gut motility.

Yoga and pilates, which you can do in your own home, and riding an exercise bike are also gut-healthy, winter-friendly exercise options.

value and can sometimes be a better option than fresh produce that has been stored for longer."

Beans, wholegrain cereals, lentils, nuts and seeds also contain different fibres that are broken down by gut bacteria and used to produce chemicals to help keep our body functioning.

Again, canned beans and legumes are packed with nutritional value.

"Our gut bacteria eat the fibre we eat and so our gut microbiome loves a high-fibre diet with lots of plant foods," Assoc Prof Wright says.

"This produces chemicals that can reduce inflammation in our body or support our nervous system and hormones. It's like having a little factory in our gut."

PUT A CORK IN IT

Assoc Prof Wright also suggests people monitor their alcohol intake.

It's fine to enjoy the occasional nice glass of red with dinner, but remember that alcohol can be toxic to the liver, brain, pancreas and gut, she says.

"Some people's drinking patterns can change seasonally and too much alcohol changes the gut's bacterial composition and function," Assoc Prof Wright says.

"Alcohol is also an irritant to the gut and can cause symptoms like bloating and diarrhoea, so just be aware of how much you're drinking."

FOCUS ON FIBRE

If you're serving heartier meals, load them with different vegetables.

Dr Vishnumohan says the greater the variety of plant foods you eat across the week, including fruits and vegetables, the more diverse your gut microbiome is likely to be.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with using frozen vegetables and berries," she says.

"They're picked and snap-frozen at their peak, retain their nutritional

SWITCH SNACKS

Dr Vishnumohan suggests these gut-friendly swaps:

Savoury snacks → roasted chickpeas, fava beans or edamame

Chips or crackers → wholegrain crackers with hummus

Sweet biscuits → Greek yoghurt with berries

Processed snack bar → apple with nut butter

Plain toast → wholegrain or sourdough toast with ricotta, avocado or peanut butter