

[IMAGE]

It's Time to Build Your Immune-Boosting Food IQ

By Sophia (Dia) Finder, MEd, RD, LD

We've all heard the saying, "You are what you eat." For many Americans, this unfortunately translates to illnesses like obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease; and inflammatory and autoimmune disorders such as asthma, allergies and arthritis. So much of our overall health can be linked to what we eat, our gut health and inflammation of the gut.

The body's gastrointestinal tract creates upwards of 70 percent of immune competence, or the body's ability to fight infection, meaning there is a strong connection between the gut microbiome and overall health. A disruption in the health of the gut microbiome environment can contribute to inflammation and diseases like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Environment plays a large role in the health of the gut microbiome; and things such as the water we drink, stress and sedentary lifestyles can negatively affect its health.

Diet is an important factor in improving gut health. A plant-forward diet high in seafood, seeds and nuts can improve the overall health of the gut, while processed foods, animal-derived foods, sugar and alcohol can cause inflammation. The [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) and concepts like [MyPlate](#) are helpful when reviewing and making changes to your diet. These guidelines are based on evidence, research and science, helping to improve and increase good strains of bacteria in the gut microbiome.

[immune system](#) - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Drinking plenty of water, exercising and managing stress are also important factors in reducing gut inflammation. Consuming a fiber-rich diet that includes vegetables, fruits, and whole grains will provide plenty of soluble and insoluble fiber. The Dietary Guidelines recommend between six and nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day, along with four to six servings of whole grains to adequately feed our gut. After all, a healthy gut equals a healthy you.

Another foundation block of a healthy diet is omega-3 fatty acids. It's important to know the difference between omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids because the way they are broken down can create either pro- or anti-inflammatory reactions within the body. The average American diet contains much more omega-6 fatty acids – in meats, dairy, eggs and processed foods – than recommended. These types of foods can increase risk for cardiovascular, neurological and inflammatory disorders.

Conversely, omega -3 fatty acids – in flax, soybeans, canola oil, walnuts, hemp seeds, salmon, anchovies, sardines, herring, etc. – yield healthy fatty acids like EPA and DHA and are anti-inflammatory. They are also proven to decrease the risk for conditions including heart disease, breast and colon cancer, and neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and dementia. Increasing omega-3 intake can also reduce the risk for other diseases prevalent in the U.S. like depression, ADHD and childhood allergies.

It's also important to consume the majority of nutrients through food. Supplementation can be helpful, but it should be used in tandem with a healthy diet, as it's not as beneficial as consuming omega-3s through food. Both the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) and the Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diets are packed with omega-3s, incorporate large amounts of fruits, vegetables and fish and have been shown to improve cognition.

In addition to the benefits received from consuming a diet full of fresh fruits and vegetables, these types of foods are often quite beautiful, which can contribute to developing a healthy relationship with food. No foods are inherently good or bad, but consumption is all about balance and moderation. Plus, beautiful foods are often strong supporters of gut health.

A fun way to add whimsy to your diet is to cook with edible flowers, which are used for their health benefits because they contain vitamins and minerals, and are a source of fiber. A plant-forward diet also is anti-inflammatory and can boost the immune system. Types of edible flowers include:

- *Fennel* is high in fiber and has a gut-calming benefit. Its natural licorice flavor makes it perfect for baking, cooking and making teas.
- *Calendula petals* (marigolds) provide anti-inflammatory benefits and can be sprinkled on salads or soups to add beautiful color to any dish.
- *Dandelion blossoms* contain probiotics associated with good gut health. They have a zesty flavor, making them the perfect addition to pesto or soup.
- *Chamomile* improves digestive health and is great for tea or adding to oatmeal and smoothies.
- *Nasturtium* is full of antioxidants and has antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. Its spicy, peppery flavor makes it a great addition to vegetables like squash or infusing in vinegar.

Remember, not all plants are edible and not every flower is safe to eat, so be careful when harvesting from the wild. If you're purchasing these flowers from a store, be sure the packaging is marked "edible."

Diet plays a much larger role in our overall health than just consuming calories, as good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle work symbiotically to decrease the effects of inflammation on the body. The health of the gut correlates with our overall health and well-being, so it's extremely important to improve and maintain gut health. Incorporating a plant-forward dietary philosophy and reducing the consumption of processed foods can lead to an overall healthier and happier life.

Sophia (Dia) Finder, MEd, RD, LD, is the clinical coordinator of applied nutrition & dietetics at Logan University in Missouri. She previously worked as a registered dietitian for more than three decades and has a wide range of experience in her field.

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