

Gut Health: A guide for the endurance athlete

Runners are a sensitive lot, especially when it comes to the gut. With an increase in awareness and diagnosis of digestive issues like Irritable Bowel Syndrome, food intolerances, Crohn's and Coeliac Disease, it's no surprise that gut health is a hot topic of conversation. But as a runner, why is it so important for you to take care of your gut?

Firstly, What is the Gut?

Our digestive system, aka our gut, is 9m long and has a surface area 30x the size of our skin! Our guts are home to trillions of bacteria, which are capable of thousands of different functions - they help to digest food, produce vitamins and minerals, train our immune system...the list goes on. The bottom line is our gut bacteria directly impact the way we feel and perform each day.

How Does Endurance Training Impact Your Gut?

As a trail runner, you may be more susceptible to diarrhoea and other gut symptoms, especially in warmer temperatures and if your body becomes dehydrated.

Gastrointestinal distress occurs because running causes an increase in pressure in the intra-abdominal region and your organs are bouncing up and down. Along with this, blood flow is redirected away from your gastrointestinal tract to the exercising muscles, heart, lungs, brain and skin meaning blood flow to the intestines is often reduced by up to 80%! All of this compromises gut function and can make symptoms worse.

How Does a Healthy Gut Impact Your Performance?

The good news is that looking after the health of your gut may actually improve performance and reduce the likelihood of digestive issues when running. Here's how!

- **Boost immunity:** your gut bacteria play a vital role in regulating your immune function as they are involved in training your immune system to respond to pathogenic bacteria that enter. A healthy and diverse population of gut bacteria can help to prevent you from getting sick - which in turn translates to fewer sick days and more consistent training.
- **Increase energy levels and endurance:** your healthy gut bacteria produce enzymes and aid digestion, thereby helping you to maximally absorb nutrients from your food. Some bacteria even produce short-chain fatty acids that are used by your body as an additional energy source. This essentially means your body can keep on going for longer.
- **Reduce the negative side-effects of long distance running:** gastrointestinal issues like bloating, cramps or diarrhea when your training are no fun. A healthy, balanced gut microbiome may help prevent or lessen these issues.

- **Reduce recovery time:** beneficial gut microbes help reduce inflammation by regulating your immune system and producing short-chain fatty acids. This translates to quicker recovery time.
- **Aid sleep:** The relationship between sleep and the microbiome is increasingly seen as a two-way street. Our gut bacteria seems to have an effect on how we sleep. In turn, sleep appear to affect the health and diversity of the important bacterial world that lives in our gut.
- **Promote mental and emotional wellbeing:** a number of brain chemicals and hormones, including serotonin and cortisol, are either produce or modulated by our gut microbiome. A healthy gut can therefore play a vital role in both your mental and emotional wellbeing, which can impact your ability to train and work at your optimum.

How Can You Look After Your Gut to Improve Your Performance

Luckily, there are a bunch of effective and simple tips that you can implement into your daily routine to look after the health of your gut microbiome.

- **Restore your gut with probiotics:** Probiotics are the ‘good’ bacteria that reside in our guts, which are beneficial for our health, especially our digestive system. They can help to combat bloating, gas and discomfort caused by overgrowth of yeasts or ‘bad’ bacteria. [Sunsol’s brand new Probiotic Muesli](#) available at Coles contains the probiotic BC30 that has been shown to play a role in digestive and immune health.
- **Feed your healthy gut bugs with prebiotics:** Prebiotics are a type of fibre that pass through the body undigested, acting as food for the probiotics in your gut. A diet consisting of different prebiotic foods can lead to a diverse range of gut bacteria, which is beneficial for your health.
Good sources of prebiotics: wholegrains (e.g. oats), fruits (e.g. bananas, apples and berries), vegetables (e.g. garlic, leeks, asparagus, artichokes and onion), legumes (e.g. chickpeas, lentils and kidney beans).
- **Eat more polyphenol rich foods:** Polyphenols are naturally-occurring compounds found in plants that make their way to your large bowel, where they are broken down by gut bacteria. Polyphenols can also help support the growth of friendly bacteria and inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria which can lead to a diverse healthy microbiome.
Good sources of polyphenols: dark chocolate, grape skins, green tea, almonds, onions, berries, apples, broccoli
- **Eat a variety of foods:** In today's busy world, it can be very easy to fall into the habit of eating the same few meals week in and week out. Research has found that a limited diet could mean we’re missing out on foods that are vital to support a flourishing gut microbiome. Try branching out and including a wider variety of wholesome, nutritious foods in your diet.
- **Avoid highly processed, sugary foods** - the issue at play here is that, more often than not, people who eat a diet too high in added sugar might not be getting enough

fiber—regularly eating white bread instead of whole grain, apple juice instead of an apple or candy instead of a carrot. A low-fiber diet can deprive our beneficial gut microbes of the food they need to flourish, which could offset the bacterial balance.

- **Stay Hydrated:** Hydration is essential for optimal digestion and overall health. Fibre, (particularly prebiotic fibres) are important for gut health, however, in order for this type of fibre to do its job, adequate water is required. Drinking insufficient water slows down your digestive system significantly and results in harder stools that are more difficult to pass.
- **Exercise regularly:** It should be no surprise that exercising is beneficial for your health and when it comes to gut health, exercise is incredibly important. Being active keeps your blood circulating around your body, helping to stimulate your digestive system.

Bottom Line

The old saying that you can't outrun a bad diet is spot on. Instead, try giving your gut bacteria a little more loving because they really do impact how you feel and perform every day. To support your trail running performance eating probiotic containing foods every day, prebiotic containing foods every day, including lots of polyphenols and drinking plenty of water.