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INTRODUCTION

Gut health is a vital component of overall health. An unhealthy or imbalanced gut can cause major illnesses, especially when maintained over time. The gastrointestinal tract is basically the pathway that everything we consume passes through, and it is therefore affected by all of those things; medications, alcohol, excess sugar, et cetera.

Every single potentially unhealthy thing that we eat can do damage to the gut. Issues that can stem from an unhealthy GI tract include: leaky gut, inflammatory bowel disease, Crohn’s Disease, food sensitivities, bloating, gas, and frequent diarrhea. For all of these, it is easy to understand their relationship to the GI tract, but would you have expected anxiety, chronic fatigue, depression, inattention, irritability, poor memory, and mood swings to be partially dependent on gut health? It turns out that your gut is actually one of the key areas in the body where imbalance can lead to major health issues.

The way the gut works is that there are millions of bacteria that live there, with which we have a symbiotic relationship. They receive sustenance from our food, but provide countless benefits to our body overall. The gut must maintain enough of these beneficial bacteria to be healthy. There are also bacteria that can cause harm in larger numbers; these bacteria must be kept in check by our diet so that their numbers do not grow too large.

If the bad bacteria begin to grow, that means that the good bacteria have less room to exist, and an imbalance occurs. Likewise, if something is causing the good bacteria to die off or be unable to reproduce enough, it gives the bad bacteria more room to grow, and causes an imbalance. This is why diet is extremely important for gut health: everything that you eat can influence this delicate bacterial balance, and it is your job to make the right choices and help your gut remain healthy. With all of that said, here are 17 foods that can do harm to your gut.

1. High Fructose Corn Syrup

HFCS is not something that the body recognizes as natural, and it is not broken down or digested the same way as naturally occurring sugar. So right off the bat, this is something that could be harmful to the digestive tract. High Fructose Corn Syrup is created in a way that is inconsiderate of how it will affect the human body. There are quite a few contaminants present in the syrup, such as mercury.

HFCS is widely frowned upon by doctors and health professionals, and has been clearly linked to obesity, diabetes, and other diseases. Barry Popkin is a Ph.D who teaches nutrition courses; in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, he explains that HFCS does not trigger the same biochemical reactions in the body that natural glucose triggers, such as insulin and the chemical that alerts you that your stomach is full. This results in overeating, excessive sugar consumption, and increased fat production.
2. Alcohol

Drinking alcohol is rough on your digestive system because it increases acid production and it decreases nutrient absorption. GI distress symptoms like irritable bowel syndrome are fairly commonly associated with alcohol. Because of the extra acid in the stomach, acid reflux and GI ulcers are more likely to occur, says Dr. Bode, writing for the National Institute of Health.

Ulcers are open wounds inside an organ that can be extremely painful; stomach ulcers are the most common here. Alcohol consumption also affects your body’s ability to produce digestive enzymes. This means that your digestive tract is unable to fully absorb the nutrients in what you eat, and it also means that some foods cannot be broken down properly, which could lead to complications later on in the digestion process.

3. Medications like NSAIDs

Many medication types are harmful to the gut. Some cause physical damage to the organs, some throw off the bacterial balance, some may inhibit beneficial reactions from occurring, and there are probably hundreds of other ways various medications can harm the GI tract. For example, NSAIDs are a particularly prominent cause of leaky gut.

Leaky gut is when the gut can leak molecules into the rest of the body, such as waste and bacteria. This leaking usually occurs through the intestines. Effects include frequent bloating and gas. Another ill effect of NSAIDs is that they weaken the lining of the stomach; prolonged use can even destroy much of this lining, which exists to protect the delicate organ tissues from stomach acid. This can lead to ulcers and severe stomach pain. For some people, just days or weeks of taking NSAIDs daily can lead to long-term complications.

A study done by the American Gastroenterological Association showed that people who frequently take NSAIDs are much more likely to have physical damage to the small intestine. It’s important to always take the lowest dose of any medication, and only if it is truly necessary.

4. Antibiotics

Antibiotics are one of the major causes of gut diseases. Obviously, antibiotics kill the bacteria in the gut, and this can quickly and severely throw off the delicate bacterial balance that exists in your body. Doctors prescribe antibiotics too often, and the consequences are becoming clearer every day.

Unnecessary antibiotic use leads to increased rates of sickness, gastrointestinal distress, weakened immune systems, and more. Many types of antibiotics kill whatever bacteria they come into contact with, both good and bad. This can lead to Candida Overgrowth, which is an overabundance of yeast in the gut, and other imbalances which must be dealt with as soon as possible.
When taking antibiotics, make sure you regularly consume probiotics to help restore your gut’s bacterial population. Probiotic sources include kefir, kombucha, miso, sauerkraut, and dark chocolate. Also, try to avoid taking this medication unless it is medically necessary. The American Society for Microbiology found that when babies are given antibiotics, the good bacterial population is severely reduced, and over two months time, the gut still has a drastically lowered number of bacterial species because of the antibiotics.

5. Sugar And Artificial Sweeteners

Excess sugar is unhealthy for everyone, but it can actually lead to major bacterial imbalances in the gut. Candida Overgrowth was previously mentioned here; yeast eat sugar, and reproduce accordingly. This means that lots of sugar will lead to lots of yeast, and too much yeast can be very bad for the gut. Limiting sugar intake and eating probiotics regularly to keep the good bacterial populations up can help you avoid this imbalance. Artificial sweeteners are also potentially harmful to GI health.

Dr. Abou-Donia of the Duke University Medical Center explains in the *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health* that regular Splenda consumption leads to drastically decreased amounts of beneficial bacteria in the gut; this includes lactobacilli and bifidobacteria, which are usually found in probiotic yogurts. This study was done on rats, but can certainly be applied to humans. This major bacterial imbalance in the gut can lead to various issues such as leaky gut, Candida Overgrowth, gas and bloating, chronic fatigue, and much more.

6. Hydrogenated Oils

Hydrogenated oils are basically unsaturated fats, and usually contain trans fat. Of the three main types of fat that you can track on nutrition labels, saturated is the healthiest kind, unsaturated should be limited, and trans should be avoided. Unsaturated fats have extra hydrogen atoms in them, and hydrogenated oil is literally fat with artificially added hydrogen atoms. This kind lasts much longer, and so is used in many pre-packaged products to give them a longer shelf life.

However, hydrogenated oils have major health implications. First of all, they are highly processed, undergoing extremely high heat and pressure while they are being created. As one writer put it, the processed product is molecularly closer to plastic than it is to oil. The digestive system cannot fully break down hydrogenated oils, which can cause damage to the body later on. Hydrogenated oils also inhibit the absorption of nutrients in the body. Dr. Axe states in his blog Food Is Medicine that canola oil has been linked to severe liver and kidney damage, and that it can inhibit normal growth in people; it has even been banned in infant formulas because of this.

7. Gum And Thickeners

Gums like guar gum and xanthan gum can cause GI distress; even though some gum types have been shown to be rather safe overall, they can still interfere with gut health. Studies done on humans where subjects consume guar gum every day have demonstrated that severe
cramping, gas, bloating, and general discomfort are all effects of regular guar gum consumption. Those who are prone to issues like frequent gas often report worsened symptoms if they have been eating foods with gum in them recently.

Most chewing gums contain BHT, which is a known carcinogen. Most also contain artificial sweeteners, too. Thickeners are additives like carrageenan, which are put into foods to alter their texture or to thicken them. Carrageenan has no nutritional value and can cause inflammation of organs in the digestive tract. Dr. Tobacman from the medical school at the University of Illinois found in her research that partially degraded carrageenan has been a common factor in quite a few cases of stomach cancer.

8. Artificial Dyes

Artificial dyes are pretty controversial, and for good reason. There are many that are banned for use in foods by the FDA because of their effects on health. Red #2 has been shown to cause intestinal tumors, Blue #1 has been linked to ADHD, a few different dyes have been known to cause allergies and even trigger asthma, artificial dye in general has been strongly linked to upset stomach, et cetera.

There are quite a few things that can go wrong when you consume artificial dyes, and so they should be avoided. Dyes are easily absorbed into the bloodstream through the tongue or even through the intestines. On another note, dyes are thought to lead to nerve damage, causing issues like inattention and anxiety, especially in children.

9. Soft Drinks

Soft drinks contain sweeteners and flavorings; they all do, and many contain artificial flavors and dyes. High fructose corn syrup is a popular soda additive; the body is unable to fully digest this, and long-term consumption can lead to obesity and diabetes, among other diseases. Artificial sweeteners are also very common in soft drinks, and especially in diet soda.

Artificial sweeteners like Splenda can reduce the amount of healthy bacteria in the gut, throwing off the balance and creating GI issues like gas, bloating, fatigue, and leaky gut. Artificial dyes and colorings are popular in soft drinks as well, and can cause GI distress as well as a number of long-term side effects. And, most obviously, regular soda contains extremely large amounts of sugar. Drinking a couple of sodas a day can be enough to trigger an imbalance like Candida Overgrowth, because the excessive level of sugar in the body feeds the yeast and leads to far too much yeast in the gut. Soft drinks are basically a nightmare for gut health!

10. Caffeinated Drinks

Caffeinated drinks can include soda, and so all of the issues mentioned above can be added to the list here for caffeinated soda. Other drinks in the category are coffee and tea. Tea has many fantastic properties, so remember that not all teas are created equal and that moderation
is key. The negative effects of caffeine on the gut include: increased acidity, which can lead to acid reflux and ulcers; frequent urination, which can lead to excretion of useful nutrients; decreased nutrient absorption in the GI tract; and more.

Caffeine is thought to affect nutrient absorption in a number of ways, meaning that the digestive system cannot do its job properly and may be under extra stress after caffeine is consumed. Because caffeine has diuretic properties, frequent urination is common, which can lead to the “accidental” loss of vitamins and minerals through the urine. Caffeine may also directly inhibit the intestines’ ability to break down and absorb nutrients.

11. Fried Food

To start off, fried foods are particularly difficult for us to digest. They take longer to digest and are more likely to result in partially undigested molecules being present in the body. Because fried food can slow down digestion so much, it often result in constipation.

Like constipation, indigestion is also likely to occur due to the difficult that the body has breaking down fried foods. Alternatively, diarrhea is also common after eating fried foods because the properties in the food stimulate GI contractions, which can move the food along too fast. Fried foods increase acidity of the stomach by quite a bit, which can cause acid reflux. This type of food is usually high in trans fats, which are the worst kind and should be avoided, and in unsaturated fats, which should be very limited.

12. Commercial Yogurt

Store bought yogurt is often something that should be avoided. Yogurt contains probiotics, which are healthy and quite beneficial for gut health, but yogurt has been commercialized into a much less useful product. For the 65% average of people who are lactose intolerant, consuming yogurt can cause stomach pain because it contains lactose.

There are two major things to look out for here. One, make sure that the yogurt actually has live and active bacterial cultures; some yogurts are made to taste good but do not actually provide probiotics, and so are pointless. Two, avoid artificial sweeteners like aspartame. Many yogurts, especially nonfat kinds, are made with artificial sweeteners, which have negative effects on GI health.

13. Breakfast Cereal

The vast majority of breakfast cereals are bad for you in at least a few different ways. Just addressing the above harmful food items, cereal is likely to contain: high fructose syrup, sugar, artificial sweeteners, thickeners, and artificial dyes. In addition, quite a few cereals contain: MSG, which can cause serious symptoms like chest pain; BHT, which can lead to liver damage and even cancer; caramel coloring, which is produced using ammonia and extreme heat and has been linked to cancer as well; and much more.
For example, Cocoa Puffs are 44% sugar and don’t even contain real cacao or grains. This cereal, just like any cereal where each piece is a specific shape, has undergone extrusion. During this process, any nutritional value that the grains had is lost, and the product is basically nutritionally pointless to eat. Most breakfast cereals are a pointless base plus a bunch of unhealthy additives—yum!

14. Crab Sticks

Crab sticks, which are mostly Pollock, Cod fish, crab extract, and imitation crab meat, have caused abdominal cramping in many people. Imitation crab meat, although inexpensive and frequently used in pre-packaged seafood, is a health hazard, particularly for the gastrointestinal system. It is best to avoid processed foods like crab sticks, which are just that: fake meat that is processed and mixed with unnecessary additives.

Crab sticks may contain preservatives, sodium, sugar, starch, cholesterol, partially hydrogenated oil, MSG, and more. Frozen crab sticks are almost always thoroughly breaded, and contain artificial flavoring. Imitation meat is a big part of most crab sticks, and so artificial flavoring and coloring may be necessary to make the product seem more like real crab.

15. Refined Wheat

Refined wheat is artificially processed grains that don’t behave in the manner that natural fibers should in the body. The body is not able to benefit from refined wheat like it can benefit from whole grains. It can lead to spikes in blood sugar, which then causes a sudden drop in blood sugar that induces the desire for another round of carbohydrates.

Gluten is the main form of protein found in refined grains, and when consumed it can lead to the destruction of the lining for the intestines. This may cause adverse affects like anemia, fatigue, irregular bowel movements, abdominal pain, and bloating. Gluten can also cause leaky gut, allowing molecules to flow into the bloodstream that don’t belong there.

16. Dairy

Dairy products should be limited by the general population, but especially so for those who are lactose intolerant. Depending on where in the world you look, about 50 to 90% of people are lactose intolerant to some degree, causing stomach pain, gas, bloating, and general discomfort.

Dairy increases the acidity of the stomach, which can lead to heartburn. Dairy products like milk often contain hormones and even antibiotics in them; these are thing that no one needs added to their food. They come from the cows that produced the milk, and are passed on to our bodies, where they can do damage. In more extreme cases, frequent dairy consumption has been linked to hormonal cancers and early puberty.
17. Cold Food

Eating foods straight from the refrigerator can actually irritate your GI tract. Upset stomach and constipation have been linked to cold food consumption because it is actually harder for your digestive system to break down and utilize cold food items. Sometimes, the organs must use so much energy warming up the cold food that it takes away from proper digestion; foods may end up partially undigested because of this.

Some of the symptoms that have been linked with frequent consumption of cold foods are: chronic fatigue, gas, bloating, bacterial imbalances, and constipation. These are all classic signs that something is going wrong during the digestive process, meaning that cold foods can actually harm your gut.
CONCLUSION

It may seem like just about every food you can buy at the store may be harmful to your gut health at this point. This may even be true, and the reason is that many of these products get the production job done cheaply, and so are attractive to manufacturers of packaged foods. This is why it is so important to know what should and should not be put into your body; those who make the food don’t usually care how it will affect your health.

If you are experiencing GI distress symptoms, eliminating one or more of these foods from your diet will likely provide relief. The general rule of thumb is that if something is highly processed, it should almost certainly be avoided. If something is moderately processed, it should probably be avoided too, but it may not always be possible. Almost anything in moderation is okay, so the best approach is to limit these foods as best you can!

References:

1. http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/79/4/537.full