

World Digestive Health Day Q&A with Dr Megan Rossi and Poo-pourri

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Dr Megan Rossi x Poo-Pourri World Digestive Health Day

****CREDIT MUST READ: Dr Megan Rossi for Poo-Pourri****

Registered dietitian Dr Megan Rossi (PhD, RD), research fellow at King's College London and author of Eat Yourself Healthy, says:

1. What should we all start doing to help with our digestive health?

No two people have the same gut or gut microbiota (or as I like to call our GM, the trillions of microbes we house in our digestive tract) and what's right for you will depend on where your gut health is currently.

While there's no 'ideal' one-size-fits-all for everyone, there is a GM that'll be just right for you. If you look after your gut health with plenty of plant-based foods, by practising mindfulness and sleeping well, among other strategies, you're likely to cultivate your own optimal GM.

Here are my top tips to look after your gut health.

Eat a wide variety of plant-based foods. I recommend aiming for 30 different types of plant-based foods every week, including fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, legumes, nuts and seeds. The more plant-based variety in your diet, the more diverse range of gut microbes, which is linked to the health of pretty much every organ in the body, including your skin, heart and brain.

Go for inclusion, not restriction. Looking after your gut health is all about inclusivity and moderation, so it's best to avoid restrictive diets (I would never recommend cutting out carbohydrates!). Overly restrictive diets can not only starve your gut bacteria and put you at risk of nutritional deficiencies, but can also create a damaging relationship with food. Fibre is a type of carbohydrate, which nourishes our gut microbes (it's their favourite food) and keeps them happy.

Move your body and get outdoors. Exercise helps to regulate your pooping habits and increase the diversity of your gut microbes, which is linked to better overall health. Sustained exercise is key, so move your body regularly, getting your heart rate up for at least 30 mins most days.

Boost your sleep quality and de-stress. Sleep and stress can have a big impact on our gut health. To help combat stress and rewire the gut-brain axis, just 15 minutes a day of meditation (or using a mindfulness app) has been shown to make a significant difference after 8 weeks. Try improving your sleep quality by setting a regular bedtime routine with relaxation exercises, limiting caffeine after 3pm and scheduling 'worry time' during your day to write down your thoughts and free up your head space before bed.

2. What can we do during lockdown to help with your digestive health?

It's only natural to feel a little stressed and anxious at the moment, which can have a direct impact

on your gut. It's all down to the gut-brain axis, the constant two-way communication between our gut and our brain.

Keep eating nutritious, balanced meals with plenty of fibre. Oats, lentils, chickpeas, wholegrains, nuts and seeds are all great examples of store cupboard sources of fibre. Frozen veggies and fruit all count too.

Stay calm and don't panic. Managing stress levels is an important factor in looking after your gut and overall health, so try practising mindfulness or using a meditation app, even for just 15 minutes a day.

Enjoy your daily exercise. Whether it's power walking, gut-directed yoga or just dancing in your kitchen, movement can help to stimulate your bowels.

Pop some poo-pourri in your bathroom. Staying home with family or housemates might make you feel uneasy about doing your 'thing'. But don't ignore the urge to go, as this can lead to constipation. Instead, popping some Poo-Pourri in your loo can be a game-changer to trap any smell and make you feel more comfortable.

Hit snooze. Aim for 7-9 hours sleep every night. If you're struggling, try improving your sleep quality using the sleep hygiene protocol from my colleagues, which I share in my book *Eat Yourself Healthy*. This includes strategies such as setting a regular bedtime routine with relaxation exercises, limiting caffeine after 3pm and scheduling 'worry time' during your day to write down your thoughts and free up your head space before bed.

3. What are your best tips on how to poop? Anything we should start doing?

The human body is actually designed to poop in the squatting position, as this straightens out the bottom of the intestine and the anus (the exit point), allowing for a smooth departure without straining.

It may be no coincidence that countries with sitting toilets (much of the Western world) have been found to have an increased risk of pooping issues, such as constipation or incomplete evacuation (where you don't feel like you've emptied your bowels properly).

To get your pooping position just right, make sure your knees are slightly higher than your hips, lean forward with your spine straight and relax your shoulders. An old shoe box or a foot stool should do the trick

Correct Pooping Position. *Eat Yourself Healthy*, by Dr Megan Rossi (published by Penguin Life).

4. What are the common misconceptions on digestive health?

Myth: You need to cut out food groups, 'detox' and 'cleanse' to look after your gut.
The biggest myth about the gut is that you need to have a restrictive diet to look after it. All of the misinformation out there about 'detox teas' and cutting out foods for gut health can be very damaging. You do not need to drink green juice, go vegan or do a 'detox' for good gut health.

Looking after your gut (and overall health) is all about inclusivity, moderation and getting plenty of

plant diversity. It's far more about what you include than what you exclude.

Myth: Bloating is all down to what we eat.

The truth is there is no single cause and there are many different triggers. Outside of food intolerances, I find it's rarely the case that specific foods alone cause bloating. Stress, wearing tight clothes all day and lack of movement are common contributors - as well as HOW we eat.

Before cutting out foods that are perfectly good for you because an online article said lentils or apples were the 'biggest culprits'... there are a bunch of simple things you can do to ease the bloat. These include checking for common food intolerances, splitting your food intake into smaller meals, chewing well, avoiding tight clothes and rewiring the gut:brain axis.

Rest assured the occasional bloat is totally normal, especially after a heavy meal or extra fibre. In fact, a little bit of bloating after a high fibre meal is a good thing! It means your inner community of microbes are well-fed and doing their job.

Myth: Sugar is bad for your gut or 'feeds "bad" bacteria'.

When we eat sugar, it's absorbed very high up in our intestine and most of the bacteria live in the lower part of the intestine, so the sugar doesn't actually reach the bulk of our gut microbes. Therefore the sugar itself won't be 'harming' your GM.

However, having lots of added sugar tends to mean you're eating a lot of processed foods that aren't high in dietary fibre (which feeds your gut microbes). Eating some sugar every now and again is completely fine, as long as you're still getting plenty of dietary fibre.

Myth: Food intolerance tests will help diagnose my gut issues

Unfortunately, scientists are yet to develop a suitable test for diagnosing food intolerances (with a breath test for lactose intolerance being the one exception). Despite this, a number of invalid tests have emerged selling nothing but pseudoscience, lacking both scientific evidence and clinical relevance. Find out more about this on my Education Hub [here](#).

5. What can you do to help with constipation?

There are different types of constipation and it's a good idea to identify the common culprits most relevant to you. These include low levels of physical activity, stress, poop anxiety, changes to routines, taking new medications or supplements, food choices and lack of fibre, or not drinking enough water.

Top Tips to Combat Constipation

Hydrate. Aim for at least 1.5-2 litres of water a day

Fibre. Try to hit the recommended 30g of fibre every day, including wholegrain fibre.

Prunes or green kiwi fruit. Studies show 100g prunes or 2 kiwis a day can help, so try starting with 1/2 portion for the first week to let your gut adjust.

Exercise. Power walking can help stimulate your bowels.

Morning routine. Give yourself 5-10 minutes to sit and relax on the toilet, without straining or pressuring your bowels. Listening to music or a mindfulness app can help to relax too.

5. What can you do to help with diarrhoea?

Loose or watery poop occurs when there is either too much fluid secreted into the intestine or not enough fluid reabsorbed into your body. There are two types: acute (short-term, caused by the invasion of unfriendly microbes) or chronic (longer-term).

For acute diarrhoea, you'll need to let your body process and get rid of the nasty invader, but you may get some relief and avoid making it worse by:

Avoiding gut-stimulating food and drink, such as coffee, alcohol, high fat meals and chilli

Having six small meals, rather than three big ones. Smaller portions give your body time to digest and absorb properly.

Stay away from sugar-free foods like chewing gum. These can contain ingredients like sorbitol and xylitol, which are poorly absorbed by your gut and move down your intestine, fast, attracting more water as they go.

6. Is pooping anxiety a thing? And what can we do to help stop it?

Like each of us, our bowels are unique and have their own 'personality' too. Some are pretty laid back and easy-going, while others can be a little more sensitive, shy and rely on routine. That's why there's no one strategy that suits all.

If you feel uneasy about 'doing your thing' while staying home with the family or housemates, or when you're out of your comfort zone, you're not alone. In my clinical practice, I've found that using poo-pourri can help some of my patients to reduce their anxiety and boost their bowel confidence.

7. What does your poop tell you about your health?

Your poop is one of the most underutilised tools to uncover what's going on inside you and is an invaluable resource when it comes to assessing your gut health. It can also let you know when it might be time to visit your GP.

Inspecting every 'delivery' is certainly not required; instead, just keep an eye on what your average poop looks like. Most of us have at some stage experienced a bout of diarrhoea, or a bit of a funky coloured poop, and that's usually OK. However, if it's an ongoing issue that's happening alongside other symptoms, that's when it deserves further investigation. In my book (Eat Yourself Healthy), I share an easy-to-follow assessment for checking in with your poop, looking at the frequency, colour, size and consistency.

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