



GUT-HEALING FOODS

Looking for foods to help relieve digestive symptoms and build a more resilient gut?

We got you.

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When our digestive systems act up, many of us work to identify and eliminate problem foods, which can be an important first step in finding relief.

“So many different foods trigger people, and there is so much confusion over what gives them digestive distress,” says Hilary Boynton, coauthor of *The Heal Your Gut Cookbook*. “That is [what makes an elimination diet so valuable](#).”

Elimination diets often relieve symptoms, but most are not meant to last forever. “I do not see these protocols as lifelong ways of eating,” says clinical nutritionist Liz Lipski, PhD, author of *Digestive Wellness*. “Instead, it is a therapeutic trial to see if changing your diet makes you feel better, to allow the gut to heal, and to give you diagnostics.”

Once you’ve identified and eliminated trigger foods, say many experts, it’s essential to focus on what you *can* eat. After all, whether you suffer from ulcers, acid reflux, leaky gut, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or some other undiagnosed gut distress, you can choose foods that promote healing, fortify digestive health, and support the entire gastrointestinal (GI) ecosystem.

An added bonus: These beneficial foods also support a more resilient mind. “The gut microbiome can have dramatic effects on mind and mood,” says integrative nutritionist Kathie Swift, MS, RDN, LDN. This is due to [the strong connection between the gut and the brain](#) through the vagal nerve and hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis. “It’s food as psychological medicine,” she explains.

When your digestion isn’t optimal, it helps to know there are still foods you can enjoy. Knowing you have a list of supportive, go-to options can help you stay strong and nourished — and get you on the road to healing.

Read on for seven of the best gut-healing foods.



1.

DANDELION GREENS

GOOD FOR:

Fat digestion

Dandelion greens enhance fat digestion in two ways: They're both a choleric, meaning they stimulate bile production, and a cholagogue, an agent that increases bile flow.

“If a person feels like they are not digesting fat well, a cholagogue can help,” says Lipski. Dandelion greens may also [promote bowel regularity](#) and improve blood-sugar balance. They are anti-inflammatory and anticarcinogenic, too.

HOW TO EAT MORE:

Dandelion is notoriously bitter, so if you're keen on bitter flavors, try the greens in salads, as a base for pesto, or sautéed or braised with garlic.

You can also drink roasted-dandelion-root tea — its pleasant bitterness makes it an excellent coffee substitute.

If you have a sweeter palate, try adding dandelion greens to a smoothie with berries, ginger, or green apples. (Find recipes and simple ways to use this powerful plant at [“Dandelion Greens.”](#))

CAUTION:

Since dandelion stimulates bile production, those with gallstones or bile-duct issues should consult a healthcare practitioner before consuming large quantities.





CABBAGE JUICE

GOOD FOR:

Peptic ulcers

In 1949, researcher Garnett Cheney, MD, wanted to see if cabbage juice could help heal ulcers, so he asked study participants to drink a liter of cabbage juice daily and then tracked how long it took their ulcers to heal compared with people who tried conventional therapy.

The results were astounding: Those who drank cabbage juice saw their ulcers heal in an average of nine days. Earlier studies suggested that conventional treatment typically healed the ulcers in 42 days.

Cheney didn't know what we know today — that most ulcers are triggered by the bacteria *Helicobacter pylori* — but he discovered something that research confirmed some 60 years later. In one animal study, cabbage juice showed “significant inhibitory effects” on *H. pylori*. Plus, cabbage, like all crucifers, has a vast array of health-promoting properties, including supporting the [liver's detox efforts](#) and helping to guard against cancer.

HOW TO EAT MORE:

Cabbage juice is surprisingly palatable when it's combined with juice from other vegetables and fruits, like beets, parsley, and lemons. It may be hard to drink a liter a day, Lipsky notes, “but if you get in a little bit every day, you will end up with some benefit.”

Eating cabbage is easier and also offers plenty of gut-healing benefits: Add it to soups and stir-fries, sauté it in butter and spices, or roast it in the oven — cooking softens cabbage's astringent flavor.

And sauerkraut offers double benefits as a fermented food with probiotics.

CAUTION:

If you suffer [frequent bloating and gas](#), cabbage may exacerbate those symptoms, [especially if it's eaten raw](#). If this is true for you, test to see if cooking cabbage makes it more digestible.



3.

FERMENTED FOODS

GOOD FOR:

Gut dysbiosis, leaky gut, constipation, diarrhea, maintaining long-term gut health, building digestive resilience

Sauerkraut, kimchi, yogurt, kefir, and other [fermented fare](#) are rich in probiotics, which support the health of the gut microbiome. [Probiotics](#) have also been shown to help correct gut dysbiosis; protect the delicate gut lining; improve transit time, regularity, and stool consistency; and treat and prevent antibiotic-associated diarrhea.

Some research suggests that fermented foods may also ease IBS symptoms and prevent diverticulitis, but results are inconclusive. Use your body's response as a guide when deciding whether or not to eat fermented foods. If they trigger problems, avoid them (at least for now). If not, enjoy them to your heart's content; their probiotics make them a [boon for gut health](#).

HOW TO EAT MORE:

Ferments such as sauerkraut and kimchi are great counterpoints to anything rich or starchy. They also add bright flavor to sandwiches and stir-fries — especially those with a creamy sauce like peanut or coconut.

For breakfast, plain yogurt can be topped with berries and nuts; for lunch or dinner, it can be used as a garnish for curries and other spicy dishes.

Those who love tangy flavors can enjoy drinks like kvass and kombucha. Just be on the lookout for added sugars, which can negate some of the benefits of fermentation. ([Make your own fermented foods with these eight recipes.](#))

CAUTION:

Some functional-medicine practitioners argue that gut conditions like [SIBO \(small intestinal bacterial overgrowth\)](#) don't need more microbes introduced into the ecosystem. The way to tell if that's true in your case is to track symptoms: If you notice an uptick in bloating after consuming fermented foods or drinks, ease off.



A.

BONE BROTH

GOOD FOR:

Leaky-gut syndrome, long-term gut health

Sipping [bone broth](#) can be soothing when your gut is overactivated; it may also be healing. “We know that bone broth is high in collagen, minerals, glucosamine, and chondroitin — compounds that alkalize and nourish the body,” says Lipski. “They seem to be really healing for the gut.”

When your digestion isn’t optimal, adding some broth to your diet is a great way to get more vitamins and minerals — and make the most of them. Research on [collagen](#) is mixed, but some experts suggest it may improve tight junctions in the gut by helping to rebuild damaged tissue.

HOW TO EAT MORE:

Drink it like tea, use it as a base for soups and stews, add it to chili, or use it as a cooking liquid for grains or as the base for a risotto. ([Make your own bone broth with this easy recipe.](#))

CAUTION:

If your body overproduces histamine (a condition known as mast cell activation syndrome), steer clear of bone broth. “Bone broth can trigger a histamine response,” says Lipski. (For more on histamines, visit “[What You Need to Know About Histamine Intolerance.](#)”)



5.

GARLIC

GOOD FOR:

Peptic ulcers, food poisoning and other acute gut infections, gut dysbiosis

The phytonutrient content of garlic is so impressive that functional-medicine physician Terry Wahls, MD, suggests that two cloves are as nutritionally potent as a full cup of any other vegetable. Garlic has been shown to kill *H. pylori*, the bacteria that causes a majority of peptic ulcers, and research at Washington State University found that garlic was 100 times more effective than two popular antibiotics in killing *Campylobacter bacterium*, one of the most common culprits behind food poisoning. (This effect appears to be attributable to garlic's sulfur compounds.)

Garlic also contains [prebiotics](#), a type of fiber that feeds good gut bacteria. So if you are suffering from an imbalance of bacteria in the gut microbiome, know that garlic works as both an antibiotic (killing off hostile bacteria) and a prebiotic (feeding good bacteria).

HOW TO EAT MORE:

Garlic is extremely versatile. Add it to sautés and stir-fries; crush it into salad dressing; include it in sauces; enjoy it raw in pesto.

[Raw garlic delivers the most potent antimicrobial benefits](#). When heating, add it just before taking a dish off

the flame. Either way, try to chop it at least 10 minutes before cooking it; this triggers an enzyme reaction that boosts its healthy compounds. (Try our "[Honey-Fermented Garlic](#)" for a pungent treat that is full of bacteria to aid your gut microbiome.)

CAUTION:

Garlic is a high-FODMAP food — an acronym for “fermentable oligo-, di-, monosaccharides, and polyols.” This group of carbohydrates can sometimes trigger bloating and stomach pain. If you associate these symptoms with eating garlic, you may be intolerant of some high-FODMAP foods. [Consider trying a low-FODMAP diet](#), which temporarily eliminates foods with high levels of these substances.





CHIA, FLAX, AND HEMP SEEDS

GOOD FOR:

Constipation, gut inflammation

Chia seeds, flaxseeds, and hemp seeds are excellent sources of fiber, a healing nutrient for the gut. [“Fiber is the key](#) nourishment for the gut microbes,” Swift explains.

Flaxseeds have been shown to reduce inflammation in the gut and improve glucose tolerance. Both flaxseeds and chia seeds are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which help tamp down inflammation systemwide. And the added fiber is good for maintaining colon health.

HOW TO EAT MORE:

All three seeds add protein, fiber, and essential fatty acids to your morning smoothie. Toasted hemp seeds add crunch to salads. Ground flaxseeds and chia seeds can be mixed with water and used to replace eggs to bind baked goods. (Learn how at [“How to Make a Chia or Flaxseed Egg.”](#))

Chia seeds are also great thickeners: Mix them with coconut milk, berries, and a little honey or maple syrup for a tasty pudding.

CAUTION:

Health experts once universally cautioned people who suffered from diverticulitis to avoid eating seeds because they might get stuck in the diverticula (the pouches that can form in the colon) and trigger an infection. That view is changing, however, as the link between diverticulitis and seed consumption is unproven. Err on the side of caution and avoid seeds if you are recovering from a severe flare-up.





GINGER

GOOD FOR:

Motility issues, nausea, functional dyspepsia, flatulence, bloating, [belching](#)

Functional dyspepsia occurs when food sits in the stomach for too long for no apparent structural reason — and it can stir up trouble. People with functional dyspepsia report feeling full after eating only a small portion, and they regularly experience post-meal bloating, burping, and flatulence.

If you're troubled by these symptoms after eating, ginger might help: Studies have shown it speeds up gastric emptying. [Ginger](#) has also been well studied for its anti-nausea effects; it's long been used as a treatment for motion sickness and morning sickness.

HOW TO EAT MORE:

Ginger adds mild heat to dishes both savory and sweet. Fresh ginger is common in stir-fries and curries, but it's also terrific in dressings and marinades; adds a kick to green smoothies and juices; and livens up baked goods.

Boiling fresh ginger for tea makes a great post-meal digestif.

CAUTION:

Eating a large amount of ginger may trigger mild heartburn or cause diarrhea.



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