



# Gut Myths

## GUIDE

Highlighting some of the most common myths *and* debunking them





## Introduction

**As we learn more about the gut and its role in overall health, it is only natural that we look for ways to keep our digestive system healthy. However with so much information out there, it's important to separate fact from fiction.**

Having the wrong information is just as bad – or sometimes worse - than having no information at all, and that is certainly true of gut health. The gut is an extremely complex organ with functions ranging from digestion to making brain chemicals, so if we get the wrong advice it can disrupt the intricate balance. If the balance is already disrupted then misinformation can take you further down that road.

Make sure you get your information from trustworthy sources such as dietitians and gastroenterologists, or look for the scientific evidence to back up a claim that sounds too good to be true.

Just because something is repeated a lot, doesn't necessarily mean it's true and this is where myth-busting comes in. Loving your gut is easy once you know how. This **Gut Myth Guide** highlights some of the most common myths and debunks them and is a useful tool to help you spot the difference between gut-fact and gut-fiction.

**Jo Travers, BSc**, Registered Dietitian



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## Jo's top 5 myths

### Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) isn't really a medical condition

If you have ever been told that your symptoms are “just IBS” then you may be forgiven for thinking that it isn't actually a medical condition. However, IBS has very definite diagnostic criteria and treatment guidelines.

### Everyone's guts are the same

There are so many variables in everything to do with health, from someone's genes to the environment they live in. When you also throw in the endless variations in the gut microbiota, it becomes clear that everyone's gut is unique. This means that what works for one person may not work for the next and therefore treatment for gut health problems may need to be as individual as you are.

### Beans are bad for the gut

Some diets proclaim that beans are bad for your gut, claiming that they can damage the gut wall. There is no evidence for this and in fact legumes and pulses (such as beans) contain so many gut-friendly fibres that support a range of useful bacteria, and anti-inflammatory phytonutrients that the opposite is true.

### I have to eat “superfoods” if I want a healthy gut

The term “superfood” doesn't really have any official definition but it is generally reserved for expensive ingredients like goji berries and chia seeds. However, any fibre containing foods such as fruit, vegetable or whole grain can be beneficial for gut health.

### Wind is always a sign there's something wrong with your gut

Some specific carbohydrates – known as FODMAPS- found in certain fruits, vegetables and beans ferment in the gut producing gas. The amount of gas produced varies by individual, but everyone passes wind up to around 25 times a day. This is the body's perfectly normal and healthy way of getting rid of excess gas in the digestive system.

#### References

- Wind is always a sign that there's something wrong with your gut*  
 Goodrich et al. (2014) *Cell*, 159(4):789-799.  
 Hasler. (2006) *Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 2(9):654-662.  
 Mu et al. (2017) *Frontiers in Immunology*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fimmu.2017.00598>.  
 NICE (2018) *IBS: Irritable bowel syndrome in adults: diagnosis and management*. Available at: [www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg61](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg61) (Accessed: September 2020).  
 Slavin and Lloyd. (2012) *Advances in Nutrition*, 3(4):506-516.  
 Slavin. (2013) *Nutrients*, 5(4):1417-1435.  
 Tasnim et al. (2017) *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 8:1935.



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## Victoria Avery

Registered Nutritionist, Senior  
Science Officer, Yakult UK

*Focuses on more gut health myths*

### Fresh foods are best for digestive health

'Fresh is best', something you've probably heard a lot before. And yes, cooking from scratch is a good way of knowing exactly what you're eating and allowing you to control the amount of added sugar and salt in your food, but there are actually some positives in eating food that *isn't fresh*...

- Frozen, tinned and dried fruits and vegetables are often a more convenient option than their fresh counterparts and they still count towards your 5-a-day and fibre recommendation. Weight for weight dried fruits actually often have a lot more fibre compared to the fresh version, although it is best to limit the portion to one heaped tablespoon because they also contain more sugar. When it comes to tinned fruits, choose those tinned in their juice, rather than syrup – even light syrups have sugar in them.
- Reheated potatoes and pasta have more resistant starch compared to freshly cooked. Resistant starch is a type of fibre that arrives in the large intestine undigested, where it is then *fermented* (broken down) by the bacteria in the gut to produce short chain fatty acids which are an important energy source for the cells lining the gut. So batch cooking not only saves you time, but you could also be helping your gut out at the same time.

#### References

*Fresh foods are best for digestive health*

BBC (2014) *Can my leftovers be healthier than the original meal?* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3LncBcDcCXKgtFvrDZVnNQ/can-my-leftovers-be-healthier-than-the-original-meal> (Accessed: September 2020).

Dreher. (2018) *Nutrients*, 10(12):1833.

Lockyer and Nugent. (2017) *Nutrition Bulletin*, 40(1):10-41.

Yadav et al. (2009) *International Journal of Food Science and Nutrition*, 4:258-272.



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## Fasting will improve my gut health

There is no evidence to support that extreme fasting can benefit gut health, in fact it may be detrimental for your gut microbiota, however there are a few ways that intermittent fasting or time-restricted feeding may be beneficial for your gut.

- Fasting a few hours before going to sleep may be beneficial for your gastrointestinal tract, as your gut produces fewer substances to break down food overnight allowing your gut to function at its optimum internal rhythm.
- Intermittent fasting can improve gut motility, which is the contraction of the muscles in the gastrointestinal tract that allow food to move through the digestive tract.
- Fasting can give your gut a break from constant digestion. Allowing around 3 hours between meals allows full digestion of foods before re-starting the process.



### References

#### *Circadian rhythm*

Ekmekcioglu and Touitou. (2011) *Obesity Reviews*, 12(1):14-25.

#### *Three-hour between meals*

Deloose et al. (2012) *Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 9 :271-285.

#### *Improved gut motility*

Longo and Mattson. (2014) *Cell Metabolism*, 19(2):181-192.

## Detoxing will reset my digestive system

Cleanses, whether that's through colonic irrigation, laxative use or liquid based diets, have been suggested to help 'clean' our digestive system to remove waste and toxins. But, unless these are advised by a medical professional, they really aren't necessary and could in fact disrupt our guts natural microbiota. Our digestive system moves food and waste along without us even thinking about it and we have other organs, such as the liver and kidneys, processing waste and toxins to remove them from the body. So, the best things we can do to help keep the digestive tract working optimally and moving along nicely are...

- Drink an adequate amount of fluid -approximately 2 litres a day, and this doesn't just have to be water; milk, tea and coffee, among others can count too.
- Eat a diet rich in fibre – this can help prevent constipation. In the UK, adults are recommended to have 30g of fibre a day, but sadly most of us aren't meeting that with most adults only eating an average of 18g a day. Try switching to wholegrains, add in pulses, beans and nuts as well as at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.
- Get our bodies moving – even low intensity exercises, such as walking and swimming, can help.

### References

Cleanses & gut microbiota

Nagata et al. (2019) *Scientific Reports*, 9:4042.

## Spicy food causes ulcers

Lifestyle factors, such as stress, alcohol, and eating spicy foods were previously thought to cause stomach ulcers. It is now understood that most stomach ulcers are in fact caused by the bacteria *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) or excessive use of anti-inflammatory medication.

### References

Spicy food

NHS (2018) *Stomach Ulcer*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stomach-ulcer/causes/> (Accessed: September 2020).



## Bacteria are bad

There are trillions of bacteria and other microorganisms that live in our digestive tract, called the *gut microbiota*. Some bacteria are known to be harmful and cause infection but those peacefully living in our gut are involved in a number of functions that are of benefit to us:

- Breaking down (fermenting) indigestible fibre which produces energy, nutrients and other metabolites.
- Production of vitamin K and several B vitamins
- Preventing colonisation by harmful/pathogenic bacteria.
- Supporting the development and maintenance of the immune system.

### References

*Bacteria are bad*

Thursby and Juge. (2017) *Biochemical Journal*, 474(11):1823-1836.

## Your stomach only growls because you are hungry

Borborygmi is the term that describes the noises that your digestive tract makes, as a result of the natural bowel movement 'peristalsis'. This can often be heard when the digestive tract is relatively empty and people are hungry as there is nothing to muffle the sounds. But sounds can also occur after you have eaten and the food, along with gas produced by fermentation by the gut microbiota, is being passed through the gut.

### References

*Stomach growls*

Ellis, H. (1979) *French's Index of Differential Diagnosis (Eleventh Edition)*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-7236-0490-7.50034-3>.



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## You need to poo once a day to be healthy

One of the criteria for constipation is bowel movements occurring less than three times a week, and as a general rule bowel movements occurring three times a day to three times a week is “normal”.

You can usually think of your bowel habit as normal if you:

- have regular bowel movements (not necessarily once a day).
- don't have ongoing symptoms of constipation or diarrhoea.
- can have a bowel movement without straining or using laxatives.

### References

#### Constipation

NICE (2020) *Constipation*. Available at: <https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/constipation/#!diagnosisSub> (Accessed: September 2020).

Cancer Research UK (2019) *About the Bowel*. Available at: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping/physically/bowel-problems/about-the-bowel> (Accessed: September 2020).

## Supplements will make up for skipping meals

As the name suggests, supplements should be in addition to your regular diet to account for any nutrients that could be missing. Most people can get all the nutrients they require from food alone, and therefore we should aim for a healthy, balanced diet, rather than relying on supplements. Furthermore, the foods we eat contain more than just vitamins and minerals, they also contain fibre and other elements which are important for our digestive health.

*(Note: there are certain population groups that may require additional supplements and we should all consider taking 10micrograms of vitamin D during the winter months).*

### References

#### Supplements

British Dietetic Association (BDA) (2019) *Supplements: Fact Sheet*. Available at: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/supplements.html> (Accessed: September 2020)

NHS (2020) *Vitamin D*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vitamins-and-minerals/vitamin-d/#:~:text=Advice%20for%20adults%20and%20children%20over%204%20years%20old&text=But%20since%20it's%20difficult%20for,during%20the%20autumn%20and%20winter> (Accessed: September 2020).







## Julie Thompson

Information Manager, Guts UK

*focuses on diverticular disease, acute pancreatitis, bile acid malabsorption, microscopic colitis and constipation.*

### You need to remove skins, seeds and pips from your diet if you have diverticular disease

New advice was published by NICE in November 2019 to say people do not need to avoid seeds, nuts, popcorn or fruit skins for diverticular disease but in fact there was never any clear evidence to suggest it was a problem.

**Further information:** See the Guts UK Information on Diverticular Disease.

#### References

NICE (2019) *Diverticular disease: diagnosis and management*. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG147> (Accessed: September 2020).

### Alcohol is the biggest cause of acute pancreatitis

No, it's gallstones. 50% of acute pancreatitis is caused by gallstones and 25% of cases are as a result of alcohol intake.

**Further information:** See the Guts UK Information on Acute Pancreatitis.

#### References

*Bile acid malabsorption*

Gracie et al. (2012) *Neurogastroenterology & Motility*, 24(11):983-e538.

### Watery poo should be endured

No – watery poo could be bile acid malabsorption or microscopic colitis, these gut conditions are often missed as a diagnosis, particularly with people who have been previously diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), so need to be tested for. Half of people with chronic diarrhoea have bile acid malabsorption and 10% of people with IBS with diarrhoea may have microscopic colitis.

**Further information:** See the Guts UK Information on Microscopic Colitis and Bile Acid Malabsorption.

#### References

*Microscopic colitis*

Guagnozzi et al. (2016). *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics*, 43(8):851-862.



## Being constipated causes poisoning of the body and this leads to chronic ill health

This is not true, although being constipated can make you feel really uncomfortable, sluggish and bloated it does not cause poisons or toxins to leak from the bowel and travel to other areas of the body causing ill health.

**Further information:** See the Guts UK Information on Constipation.

### References

*Being constipated causes poisoning of the body and this leads to chronic ill health*  
Bellini et al. (2015) *World Journal of Gastroenterology*, 21(40): 11362-11370.



**Alison Reid**

CEO, The IBS Network

**A focus on Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)**

## It's just IBS. It's not a big deal

For people living with an IBS diagnosis, it is definitely not 'just' IBS. IBS is a disordered movement of the bowel. Symptoms can include diarrhoea, constipation, or a combination of both, with abdominal pain and bloating. At any one time, IBS affects around 10-20% of people living in the UK. The condition can be debilitating and have a big impact on a person's quality of life.

**Further information:** See The IBS Network Factsheet : What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

### References

*It's just IBS. It's not a big deal.*

NICE (2015) IBS. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs114/documents/irritable-bowel-syndrome-in-adults-qs-briefing-paper2> (Accessed: September 2020).

## I don't need an IBS diagnosis

This is false. It is important to get an accurate diagnosis. Do not self-diagnose. Visit your doctor who will run blood tests to ensure your symptoms are not caused by other conditions such as coeliac disease, inflammatory bowel disease or cancer. You may have other tests too, although these are not always necessary.

**Further information:** See The IBS Network Factsheet Investigations Procedures.

### References

*I do not need an IBS diagnosis*

NHS (2017) *Getting diagnosed: Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/irritable-bowel-syndrome-ibs/getting-diagnosed/> (Accessed: September 2020).



## IBS always causes diarrhoea

IBS is a common condition that affects the digestive system. It causes symptoms like stomach cramps, bloating, diarrhoea, and constipation. These tend to come and go over time, and can last for days, weeks or months at a time. It does not always cause diarrhoea. The symptoms one person experiences will differ for another.

**Further information:** See **The IBS Network Factsheet Diarrhoea**.

### References

*IBS always causes diarrhoea*

NHS (2017) *What is IBS? Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)*. Available at : <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/irritable-bowel-syndrome-ibs/> (Accessed: September 2020).

## You can do the FODMAP diet on your own

The low FODMAP diet has become a popular treatment option for people living with IBS. It is an exclusion diet that should only be carried out under the supervision of a registered dietitian trained in FODMAPs. NICE recommend that the low FODMAP diet *'should only be given by a healthcare professional with expertise in dietary management'* (a dietitian).

The diet works by restricting FODMAP foods (foods containing Fermentable Oligosaccharides, Disaccharides, Monosaccharides and Polyols) from the diet, before then reintroducing and identifying an individual's trigger foods so a personalised diet plan can be developed. IBS is different for everyone and what works for one person may not work for another.

**Further information:** [www.theibsnetwork.org](http://www.theibsnetwork.org)

### References

*You can do the low FODMAP diet on your own*

NICE (2008) *Irritable bowel syndrome in adults: diagnosis and management*. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg61> (Accessed: September 2020).



## Other Love Your Gut Resources

For more Love Your Gut advice and information see our:

**ONLINE HEALTH ASSESSMENT**

**#GUTTALK GUIDE**

**FOOD & SYMPTOMS DIARY**

**INFORMATION PACK**

**EXCLUSIVE RECIPES**

**FACEBOOK DISCUSSION GROUP**

**COOKERY SCHOOL TIPS**

**'WHAT IS YOUR GUT TELLING YOU?' VIDEO**



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**Guts UK** is the charity for the digestive system from top to tail; the gut, liver and pancreas. Our guts have been underfunded and misunderstood for decades. We exist to change that. It's time the UK got to grips with guts. [www.gutscharity.org.uk](http://www.gutscharity.org.uk)



**Bowel Research UK** is the UK's leading specialist bowel research charity. We are dedicated to funding the best science into bowel cancer and other bowel diseases. We invest in the next generation of experts with a dedicated PhD studentship programme. We involve the public in research through our People and Research Together Programme and we work to challenge taboos and break down stigma. To find out more visit [www.bowelresearchuk.org](http://www.bowelresearchuk.org)



**The Primary Care Society for Gastroenterology (PCSG)** is the voice of Primary Care Gastroenterology. We have a (mainly) GP membership and offer advice and guidance on gastrointestinal matters, as well as lobbying and influencing. We hold scientific meetings and have a bi-annual journal 'The Digest'. To find out more visit [www.pcs.org.uk](http://www.pcs.org.uk)



**St Mark's Hospital Foundation** supports the work of St Mark's, the UK's national bowel hospital. Founded 185 years ago, St Mark's is a leading centre of excellence in the diagnostics and treatment of complex bowel disease. The Foundation raises money to fund vital research, support education and innovation, as we fight for a future free from the fear of bowel disease. See [www.stmarkshospitalfoundation.org.uk](http://www.stmarkshospitalfoundation.org.uk)



**The IBS Network** is the national charity supporting people living with Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Our mission is to provide information, advice and support and to work alongside healthcare professionals to facilitate self-care. See [www.theibsnetwork.org](http://www.theibsnetwork.org)



**Crohn's and Colitis Ireland** is a patient support group for people who are living with Ulcerative Colitis and Crohn's disease (collectively known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease or IBD), also their families and friends. [www.iscc.ie](http://www.iscc.ie)



**Irish General Practice Nurses Educational Association (IGPNEA)** is a professional membership association of General Practice Nurses. The main objective of the association is the advancement of education in general practice in Ireland. [www.irishpracticenurses.ie](http://www.irishpracticenurses.ie)





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Love Your Gut and Love Your Gut Week is an initiative of Yakult UK and Ireland in association with our UK partners: Guts UK, St Mark's Hospital Foundation, The IBS Network, Bowel Research UK, and the Primary Care Society for Gastroenterology; and Irish partners Crohn's and Colitis Ireland and the Irish General Practice Nurses Educational Association.

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