

September 2025 Hot Topics in Nutrition: How to Promote Digestive Health

McKenna Welshans, MBA, RD, LD, ACSM-EP, CSCS, CSSD

“Gut health” is a commonly discussed topic lately, but what does it mean? In short, there are trillions of bacteria and other microorganisms living in the gut, some of which work against its function, and some of which work symbiotically. A healthy gut microbiome includes the upper and lower GI tract, is free of disease, and has a diverse array of bacteria, with beneficial bacteria outnumbering the harmful ones.

Benefits of a balanced gut microbiome include improved immunity, maximal nutrient absorption from food, decreased unwanted digestive symptoms, as well as an improvement in mood and energy. Our food intake plays a significant role in our gut health. As your campus nutritionist, I’d like to share a few tips on how you can optimize your gut microbiome through your diet while eating in the dining hall.

Fiber intake:

Consuming a variety of fiber-rich foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts/seeds and legumes consistently throughout the day provides a substantial source of prebiotics, which serves as food for the beneficial gut bacteria.

Probiotics:

Consuming 1-3 servings of fermented foods daily (such as yogurt, pickled foods, sauerkraut, kefir, and kombucha) provides beneficial bacteria to add to the digestive tract.

Healthy fats:

Omega-3 fatty acids from plant-based fats (avocado, nuts/seeds, oils) and fish (salmon, tuna, etc.) can help decrease inflammatory microorganisms and strengthen the integrity of the gut wall.

Polyphenols:

Polyphenols are naturally-occurring compounds found in plants. They are not readily digested in the stomach and go to the colon to be metabolized by microorganisms. Their antioxidant properties lessen the risk for chronic disease, reduce inflammation, may improve neurocognitive function/mood, and in some cases fight bacteria.

Sample meal that can contribute to overall gut health found in the dining hall:

Shredded chicken and rice with sides of spinach/chickpea salads and a Greek yogurt parfait.

