

## Breaking down digestive health

Your gastrointestinal (GI) tract, made up of your esophagus, stomach and small and large intestines, is the biggest part of your digestive system. Your gut microbiome, the more than 100 trillion microbes living inside you, is directly linked to your body's ability to digest food, use nutrients for energy and reduce inflammation. That's why digestive, or gut health, is so important. It impacts your immune system, mental health and more.

If you experience GI issues, you're not alone. There are hundreds of digestive conditions, and an estimated 66 million people in the U.S. who have one. The good news is that you can make diet and lifestyle choices to support better gut health. John Hopkins Medicine offers these suggestions:

- **Eat a diet rich in fiber, prebiotics and probiotics**, with plenty of fruits and vegetables, fermented and pickled foods. This helps make sure you have enough good bacteria in your gut to counteract the bad bacteria.
- **Get more sleep.** Not getting enough rest increases your likelihood of obesity, which can lead to GI issues.
- **Keep it moving.** Exercise helps you maintain a healthy weight and stave off digestive problems.
- **Manage stress.** Your gut, your immune system and your mental health are all linked. Eating well reduces inflammation and cortisol levels, helping you stress less. And finding healthy ways to manage stress generally leads to healthier eating and a stronger immune system overall.
- **Seek support for mental health conditions** like anxiety and depression. Since brain and gut health are connected, getting support from both mental health professionals and nutritionists/dieticians can be beneficial.

### PAY ATTENTION TO #2

It's not exactly dinner table talk, but paying attention to your bowel movements is a great way to get a sense of your overall health. Take note of two main things: 1) texture and 2) color.

In terms of texture, the Bristol Stool Chart is your guide. You want your BMs to be soft, smooth and easy to pass. A sausage-type shape with some surface cracks is OK too. Separate, pebble-like pieces are a sure sign of constipation, and light and fluffy pieces with frayed edges or no solid pieces at all indicate diarrhea.

Food can influence the color of your stool (for example beets causing a red hue), but in general brown is the ideal pigment. Green means too much bile, yellow can mean too much fat is present and be a sign of celiac disease, gray means not enough bile/possible obstruction in the liver, and black or red (without having ingested certain foods or supplements) can be a sign of bleeding in the GI tract or rectum. Visit your doctor if you have any bleeding that persists.

Frequency is also a factor. It varies by person, but anywhere from 3x/day to once every three days is within a normal range.

Learn what's normal for you. Every little change isn't cause for concern, but if you notice drastic changes, make sure to reach out to your medical provider. This [Colorectal infographic](#) can help you with a visual.

*Most digestive conditions can be diagnosed and treated through telehealth. If you're having GI symptoms, virtual care can be a convenient (and often cost-effective) option. Check with your doctor's office to see if they offer virtual visits or ask your HR team about telehealth benefits.*



### Learn more:

[health.clevelandclinic.org/gut-health](https://health.clevelandclinic.org/gut-health) and [hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention](https://hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention)

## Gut health and mental health: A two-way street

We've all heard the expression "go with your gut" or "a gut feeling" – these feelings come from a part of our body called the enteric nervous system (ENS), or second brain. Your ENS is made up of more than 100 million nerve cells that line your GI tract, and it communicates back and forth with your central nervous system (CNS).

It was originally thought that mental health conditions contributed to GI issues like irritable bowel syndrome, but research is now showing it may be a two-way street. This is because irritation in our GI system can send signals to the CNS that impact our mood.

In her book "This is Your Brain on Food", Uma Naidoo, M.D., explains how different types of bacteria in our gut impact our brain chemistry. Dr. Naidoo cites research on how microbiota can affect everything from compounds in your brain that promote new neuron growth, to the strength of your gut wall that protects the brain and body from substances that are harmful outside of your GI system.

While these are relatively new medical findings, it's clear that the connection between gut health and mental health is much stronger than we previously thought!

Learn more: [hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention](https://hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention)

## Reducing stress and anxiety through diet

Most of us are no stranger to stress and anxiety. In fact, The Cleveland Clinic estimates more than 300 million people around the world experience some symptoms of anxiety. While there are many ways to manage these feelings, one often overlooked method is through diet. Certain nutrients can help reduce anxiety and promote a sense of calm. Here's a guide to getting more of them in your diet:

### Key nutrients and where to find them

Nutrient	Mind	Body
<b>Omega-3 Fatty Acids</b>	Known to reduce inflammation and support brain health	Fatty fish like salmon, herring, and mackerel
<b>Fiber</b>	Helps stabilize blood sugar levels, a key to managing stress	Broccoli, carrots, green beans, and leafy greens, chia seeds, brown rice, berries, apples
<b>Protein</b>	Essential amino acids that help regulate mood and reduce anxiety	Beef, chicken, turkey, eggs, beans, lentils
<b>Magnesium</b>	Helps relax muscles and reduce anxiety	Avocados and nuts
<b>Probiotics</b>	Supports gut health, which is closely linked to mental health	Yogurt, miso, fermented and pickled foods

To incorporate these foods:

- **Start small:** Begin by trying salmon for dinner, having yogurt or eggs for breakfast, including a veggie with lunch, and snacking on nuts or fresh fruit.
- **Plan ahead:** Prepare meals in advance to ensure you have healthy options readily available.
- **Stay hydrated:** Drink plenty of water to help manage stress and anxiety.

Foods to limit or avoid:

- **Alcohol:** Can exacerbate anxiety and disrupt sleep.
- **Caffeine:** Some caffeine can be beneficial, but intake can increase feelings of anxiety and jitteriness. If you consume caffeine, make sure to keep it under 400mg a day.
- **High-sugar foods:** Can cause blood sugar spikes and crashes, leading to increased anxiety.
- **Trans fats:** Found in processed foods, trans fats can increase inflammation and worsen anxiety symptoms.

Remember you don't have to redo your diet all at once. Small, mindful changes can significantly reduce stress and anxiety. Incorporate these nutrient-rich foods into your meals and snacks and avoid those that can exacerbate your symptoms. Your body and mind will thank you!

Learn more: [health.clevelandclinic.org](https://health.clevelandclinic.org)

## MISO-MAPLE SALMON



An easy, healthy and flavorful salmon recipe that's bound to please. **Makes 8 servings.**

### Ingredients:

- 2 lemons
- 2 limes
- ¼ cup white miso
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 1 (2 1/2 pound) skin-on salmon fillet
- Sliced scallions for garnish

### Directions:

Before you begin, wash your hands.

1. Position rack in upper third of oven and preheat broiler to high. Line a large-rimmed baking sheet with foil.
2. Juice 1 lemon and 1 lime in small bowl. Whisk in miso, oil, maple syrup, pepper and cayenne.
3. Place salmon, skin-side down, on the prepared pan and spread the miso mixture on top. Halve the remaining lemon and lime and arrange around the salmon, cut sides up.
4. Broil the salmon 7 to 12 minutes, just until it flakes with a fork. Serve with the lemon and lime halves and sprinkle with scallions, if desired.

### NUTRITION INFORMATION

Serving Size: 4 oz salmon

Calories	230
Fat	9g
Saturated Fat	2g
Carbohydrates	7g
Fiber	3g
Protein	28g
Folate	18mcg
Sodium	341mg
Potassium	549mg
Calcium	61mg
Vitamin A	213IU
Vitamin C	6mg
Magnesium	42mcg
Iron	1mg
Total Sugars	3g