



Fix that belly bloat

Your gut health is more important than you could ever imagine, impacting everything from your skin to your mood. Here's how to heal it when things go south.

By Danae Mercer

Gut health is all the rage these days. The billions upon billions of bacteria that live in your gut do more than just help digest foods. They've been linked to conditions like auto-immune diseases, depression, bowel problems, thyroid conditions and plenty more. One study from the University of California - Los Angeles Health Sciences has even identified evidence that anti-inflammatory health benefits can slow the developments of some type of cancer. Another study by the University of Iowa Health Care found that not enough good bacteria may have a direct link to multiple sclerosis.

Basically, these bacteria — of which there are some 300 to 500 different types inside your gut — impacts everything from your metabolism to your mood. All of this is great when everything is good and running smoothly, but what happens when your gut bacteria goes wrong?

I had this exact question in early August. While I tend to eat pretty much plant based and vegan, my gut, for some mysterious reason, had suddenly started swelling up. The bloating was viciously painful. At first I thought it was a virus from a recent trip to Thailand. Then I figured maybe I was having too much coffee. Then, perhaps, too much stress. But no matter what I did, my

gut wouldn't stop hurting, and even eating a simple meal could have me hunched over on the couch in pain. I couldn't understand what was going wrong.

"Bacteria, fungi and yeast, both good and bad, live in us and on us in a symbiotic relationship," says Linda Booth, founder of Just for Tummies and creator of natural digestive health supplements. "I like to think of it like getting on with your neighbors — some of whom might be a bit difficult to get on with. A problem occurs when all the good neighbors move out of an area, and the bad neighbors move in and take over."

Scientists are only starting to under-



stand what happens inside the gut when different bacteria strains become out of balance. But they do know it causes inflammation. "Essentially, good bacteria and higher levels of pathogens like bad bacteria, fungi or viruses can increase gut permeability, enlarging the microscopic gaps between the gut cells," says Grace Liu, a pharmacist and nutritional scientist.

"Minute microbial toxins are then able to pass through these gaps into your system. Your immune system then detects these invaders, overreacts, and causes inflammation." After trying everything from fish oil to probiotics to a non-gluten diet, I reached a state of desperation with my own gut. Nothing was working. The bloating was becoming worse and food a terrifying bringer of pain.

So I took extreme measures. I boarded a flight to Gabala, Azerbaijan, a remote

part of northern Azerbaijan on the FlyDubai route, and booked into Chenot Palace. This ultra-luxury resort has all the trappings of a decadent spa retreat, with a ground floor dedicated to high-tech anti-aging treatments and massive rooms overlooking a private lake. But what really intrigued me about this isolated spot was its possibility for healing. My gut needed more help than I could give it.

"We use food as a treatment," says George Gaitanos, chief operating and scientific officer for Chenot Palace, when talking through Chenot Palace's 850-calories-a-day meal plan. Dishes here somehow manage to be both beautifully presented, like an elaborate Michelin-starred restaurant, and somehow painfully simple. That's because salt isn't present. Nor are bold spices, onions, oils, or anything that might cause the gut to kick up a fuss.

"It's all meant to support a detoxification

process and promote a hormonal reset of the body," says Gaitanos. "Our food selection is very important. But it's also about how we process and cook it. The methods we use, such as low temperatures, moist cooking... It creates an alkaline environment in the body. Fundamental to this diet is a reduced calorie plan without experiencing malnutrition."

Most guests at Chenot Palace stay for a week. Between meals, they slink downstairs in robes and slippers (the all-purpose uniform of the retreat) for a variety of water baths, electronic current massages, mud wraps, and lymphatic draining. There are stunning manicured grounds for long walks, but visitors tend to loll by the pool, exhausting themselves in the sun.

"We know from literature that 850 calories reduces inflammation," adds Gaitanos.

The idea of the meal plan is to give the gut a chance to heal itself. Take away the food without causing the stress of starvation. Let everything reset. Let the body mend.

Weight loss, he repeats a few times, is absolutely not the goal. "It's a byproduct." The body will swing back to its pre-detox weight once guests leave, and that's ok. Chenot Palace is about mending from the inside.

Over a week, I try to mend. The controlled diet is brutally exhausting and I spend most of my time alternating between caffeine headaches and wanting to eat more. Yet by day two, my gut has stopped poofing up. By day three, the pain is gone. Faster than I could believe, the agony that had been waking me up at nights was, somehow, gone.

"The restricted diet reduces diversity within your microbiome," says Booth. "The 'bugs' like lots of variety." Then there are the specialized treatments. A team of doctors, nutritionists, aestheticians and nurses sit with me at the very beginning of my stay to work through multiple goals.

One professional writes down a list of probiotics to purchase when back in Dubai. Another recommends a treatment that involves massaging the stomach, an area I typically don't allow anyone to touch. I even book into sessions of yoga, although I do miss the morning singing bowl meditation.

"Lifestyle factors are very important for gut health," says Dr Joan Ransley, nutritionist for Love Your Gut. "The gut connects with our emotions, so if we feel stressed or upset, that is re-laid from our brain to our gut. Manage your life so you're not too stressed."

By day seven, my gut feels calm and strong. I feel zen. Everything seems sorted... right up until the moment I land back in Dubai, start eating my normal diet, and find my stomach swollen more painfully than before.

Several trips to the doctor's in Dubai results in a few prescriptions, one to kill an internal stomach virus and one to reduce the acid production my gut started making. My diet for the next month is limited to bland bananas and blander bread. But eventually, slowly, things heal in a very real way. The long process isn't so surprising, notes Grant. "You need to allow your digestive system a bit of time to adjust." The gut takes a while to heal.

"It's only over the past five years or so that we've developed the ability to sequence gut microbiota, so we can study it in the way we were studying DNA 20 years ago," says Liu. "It's like a black box that has been opened." For me, Chenot Palace was part of the gut healing process. Medical professionals in the UAE were another part. My gut has mostly mended. Now it's time to keep its trillions of bacteria going strong.

Help heal your gut in the UAE



GO FERMENTED:

Things like sauerkraut, kombucha and kimchi are packed full of gut-beneficial probiotics. You can find these things at your regular grocery store or the Organic Cafe in Dubai.



BONE BROTH:

Almost as trendy as dessert hummus, bone broth is hailed as being great for your skin and your gut. "Ideally you should have two cups per day, morning and night, first on an empty stomach. The glycine should promote a natural sleep quality so it's good for an evening drink," says The Clean Living Company co-founder, Dean Henry.

Henry launched the company after his daughter, Evie, was born with a nut allergy and he discovered the many benefits of bone broth. When it comes to inflammation, Henry points to the broth as a rich source of amino acids. "These help support the immune system. Collagen from bone broth heals gut lining and reduces intestinal inflammation - making it one of the only known food sources on the planet to do this."



JUICE RESET:

There are plenty of these on the market at the moment, but publishing director Samar Babab recommends Koldpress Juice Ko. This high-end local UAE company creates juice detoxes made-to-order. After a detailed questionnaire, you'll receive six juices a day for the duration of the cleanse (most people go for three or five days). Juices include things like Pink Panther (watermelon, pomegranate, hydrolyzed collagen), Forever Young (beetroot, ginger, lemongrass, sea salt), and Here Comes The Sun (sweet potato, orange, turmeric). The regular intervals of juices helps you stay in a satisfied state, while also allowing for your gut to go through its own healing process, according to the company. "It wasn't hard," says Babab. "The taste was pretty delicious. I would mix it with ice so it felt a bit fancier, and by the end I lost 2kg while feeling a lot 'cleaner'. koldpressjuice.com