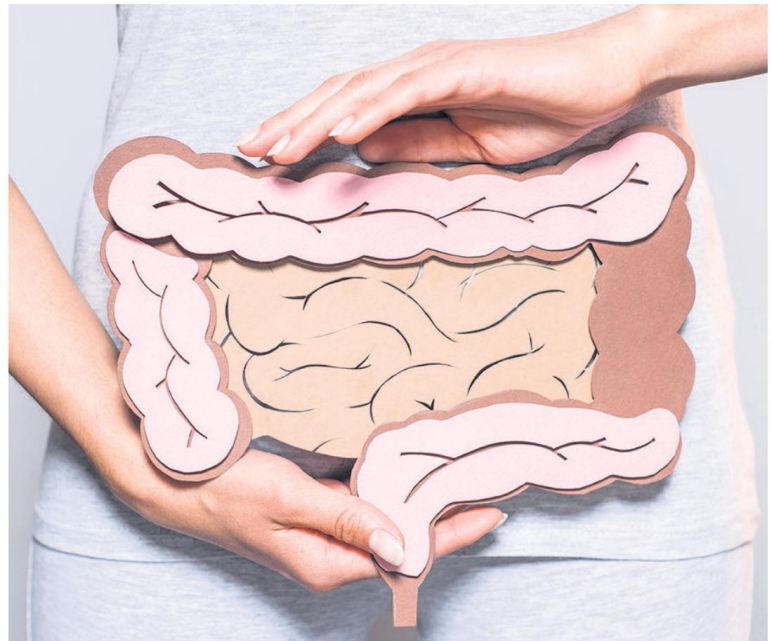


Why a healthy gut is important

Leaky gut syndrome can result in your body being susceptible to bacteria and viruses and eventually, gastrointestinal diseases



Eating a healthy diet rich in fibre and low in fat and carbohydrates, getting enough rest each night and exercising regularly are important to your gastrointestinal barrier. Consultant gastroenterologist Dr Ng Tay Meng explains why.

What is leaky gut syndrome?

Also known as hyperpermeable gut or dysfunctional gut barrier, leaky gut syndrome (LGS) is linked to the origins and development of certain gastrointestinal and extra-gastrointestinal diseases.

It occurs when gaps form in the gut's intestinal barrier, which protects the body from external harmful factors such as bacteria, viruses, toxin and chemicals. This allows bacteria and other toxins to pass into the bloodstream, and can cause widespread inflammation by triggering a reaction from the immune system. Chronic inflammation in the body or organs, and diseases, could result.

What are its symptoms and causes?

They may include chronic diarrhoea, constipation, flatulence, abdominal pain or bloating and nutritional deficiency. If organs such as the skin, brain, nerves, and joints are affected, symptoms such as headache, chronic fatigue syndrome, body ache and pain, skin rash, acne or eczema and joint pain can occur.

LGS is implicated in inflammatory bowel disease, irritable bowel syndrome, celiac disease and food allergies. Though conclusive data is lacking, scientists also suspect that LGS plays a role in metabolic or systemic diseases such as

diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, obesity and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Discuss diagnosis and treatment.

The tests used to diagnose LGS depend on the associated disease suspected. For example, for inflammatory bowel disease or celiac disease, blood tests and a gastrointestinal endoscopy are often required. If small bowel bacterial overgrowth is suspected, then a simple breath test can be used for the diagnosis.

In the same way, treatment varies. For instance, if celiac disease is present, a gluten-free diet is mandatory and the gut will become normal after gluten avoidance. If LGS is linked to inflammatory bowel disease, specific therapy with immunosuppressive drugs is required.

When can LGS be life-threatening?

If underlying conditions associated with LGS are not diagnosed and addressed, serious complications can occur.

The worst-case scenario is bacterial translocation into the blood stream from the defective intestinal barrier, causing sepsis and even multi-organ failure and death. The risk of intestinal cancer will also be increased if the disease is not controlled.

To improve digestion and support a healthy gut, get regular exercise and enough sleep every night, and reduce stress levels. Consuming high-fibre foods such as fruits, vegetables and legumes, and fermented foods such as plain yoghurt, kimchi and kombucha can boost the good bacteria in our gut flora.

Above: To improve digestion and support a healthy gut, get regular exercise and enough sleep every night, reduce stress levels and consume high-fibre foods.

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