



# Gut Microbiome and its Influence on Healthy Aging and Immune Function

Emily Thornton\*

Department of Aging Science, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

## DESCRIPTION

The gut microbiome-comprising trillions of microorganisms residing in the gastrointestinal tract-plays a pivotal role in maintaining health throughout life. In older adults, shifts in microbial composition, diversity, and metabolic activity can influence digestion, immunity, inflammation, and even cognitive function. Understanding the interaction between gut microbes and host physiology offers new avenues for promoting healthy aging through dietary, lifestyle, and probiotic interventions.

Age-related changes in the gut microbiome include reduced diversity and an increase in pro-inflammatory microbial species. These alterations can compromise the intestinal barrier, allowing translocation of bacterial metabolites that trigger systemic inflammation-a phenomenon implicated in age-associated chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and neurodegeneration. Maintaining microbial diversity is therefore critical for mitigating “inflammaging” and supporting overall health. Diet is a primary driver of microbial composition. Diets rich in fiber, polyphenols, and prebiotic compounds promote the growth of beneficial bacteria such as Bifidobacteria and Lactobacilli. These microbes ferment dietary fibers into Short-Chain Fatty Acids (SCFAs) like butyrate, which nourish colonocytes, reduce inflammation, and modulate immune function. Conversely, diets high in processed foods, added sugars, and saturated fats can favor the proliferation of pro-inflammatory microbial species, increasing susceptibility to metabolic dysfunction and gastrointestinal disorders.

The gut microbiome is intricately linked to immune function. Commensal microbes educate the immune system, promoting tolerance to harmless antigens while enhancing the response to pathogens. Age-related microbial dysbiosis can impair this immune modulation, contributing to increased infection risk, delayed vaccine responses, and heightened inflammatory activity. Interventions that restore microbial balance may enhance both innate and adaptive immunity in older adults. Cognitive health is also influenced by the gut-brain axis, a bidirectional communication system connecting the gastrointestinal tract and central nervous system. Microbial metabolites, including SCFAs,

neurotransmitter precursors, and inflammatory mediators, can affect brain function, mood regulation, and neuroplasticity. Emerging evidence suggests that promoting a healthy gut microbiome may reduce the risk of cognitive decline and support emotional well-being in later life.

Probiotics and prebiotics are practical tools for modulating the microbiome. Probiotics-live beneficial bacteria-can enhance microbial diversity, improve digestion, and reduce inflammation. Prebiotics-non-digestible fibers that nourish beneficial microbes-support the production of SCFAs and other bioactive compounds. Fermented foods, such as yogurt, kefir, kimchi, and sauerkraut, provide both probiotics and prebiotic substrates, offering a natural approach to gut health. Lifestyle factors beyond diet also influence the microbiome. Physical activity promotes microbial diversity, reduces inflammation, and supports metabolic function. Stress management techniques, including mindfulness and relaxation practices, mitigate the negative effects of chronic stress on microbial balance. Sleep quality further influences gut health, as circadian rhythms affect microbial activity and metabolite production. Medication use, particularly antibiotics and proton pump inhibitors, can disrupt microbial communities, leading to dysbiosis and increased vulnerability to infections or inflammation. Careful medication management and, when appropriate, microbiome-supportive interventions can mitigate these effects in older adults.

Environmental and social factors also contribute to gut health. Access to fresh, fiber-rich foods, clean water, and safe living conditions supports microbial diversity. Social engagement and cultural food practices encourage the inclusion of fermented and nutrient-dense foods, integrating microbiome support into daily life. Community programs and education initiatives can reinforce these practices and enhance adherence. Longitudinal studies indicate that maintaining a diverse, balanced gut microbiome is associated with improved metabolic health, reduced inflammation, and greater resilience to age-related illnesses. Microbial composition also correlates with physical performance, mood, and cognitive function, highlighting the systemic influence of gut health across multiple domains of aging.

**Correspondence to:** Emily Thornton, Department of Aging Science, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, E-mail: e.thornton@draftmail.org

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## CONCLUSION

The gut microbiome is a central determinant of health and resilience in older adults, influencing immune function, inflammation, metabolism, and cognition. Strategies to preserve microbial diversity-through diet, prebiotic and probiotic supplementation, physical activity, stress reduction, and careful

medication management-offer practical pathways to support healthy aging. Recognizing the integral role of the gut microbiome underscores the interconnection between nutrition, lifestyle, and physiological well-being, highlighting the potential of microbial-focused interventions to enhance longevity and quality of life.