

WOMEN'S
HEALTH

By Dr Shilpa McQuillan,
accredited menopause
specialist, GP and
community gynaecologist

Trust your gut feelings

to change health from the inside out

AUGUST is National Wellness Month and provides a timely reminder to prioritise our self-care and to talk about the health of the gut - a hot topic right now.

Gut health matters more in midlife

Our gut is home to a complex community of trillions of bacteria, fungi, and other micro-organisms, known as the gut microbiota. It might not be something you think about every day, but this special ecosystem plays a huge role in almost every aspect of health — from digestion and mood to hormones and immunity.

Poor diet, stress and certain lifestyle habits can throw this delicate balance out of sync. For women, keeping the gut healthy is essential at every stage of life, especially for those living with

chronic inflammatory conditions such as endometriosis. In midlife, during the perimenopause and menopause, the connection between gut health and overall well-being becomes more significant. That is because hormonal shifts and changes in metabolism can have a real impact on how well our gut functions and how good we feel.

Hormonal balance

Gut bacteria help regulate our hormones and help break down and recycle oestrogen. When the gut is healthy and balanced, it can support steady oestrogen levels, which is especially helpful for women dealing with fluctuating or declining oestrogen levels for example in pre-menstrual syndrome, perimenopause and menopause. A healthy gut may help ease common symptoms such as hot flushes,

night sweats, mood swings, anxiety, weight gain and brain fog. When the gut microbiome becomes imbalanced — a state known as dysbiosis — it can disrupt this hormonal harmony. Too much or too little active oestrogen can make symptoms worse and may also lead to digestive issues.

It is a two-way street: falling oestrogen levels can upset the gut's balance too, making it harder to regulate hormones. This can create a frustrating cycle where hormonal shifts and gut imbalances keep feeding into each other.

Weight, bloating and digestion

Many women notice it is harder to manage weight in midlife, especially when it comes to stubborn tummy fat. This can be more challenging for those women living with conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome or thyroid



issues, which can slow down metabolism. When the gut bacteria are out of balance, it decreases the metabolism, increases insulin resistance, and makes it harder for the body to regulate blood sugar. This leads to more fat being stored, along with increased cravings and appetite.

Midlife hormonal changes and an imbalanced gut microbiota can also lead to uncomfortable bloating, sluggish digestion, and constipation. By focusing on gut-friendly habits, you can feel lighter, more comfortable, and more energised.

Mood and mental clarity

There is a strong connection between our gut and brain, known as the gut-brain axis. This two-way communication system plays a big role in how we manage our mood and mental clarity.

When the gut is out of balance, it can trigger inflammation and chemical changes that negatively affect emotional well-being. It works both ways — chronic stress, anxiety, or low mood (common during premenstrual syndrome, premenstrual dysphoric disorder and midlife hormonal changes) can further upset the gut and reduce the diversity of healthy bacteria.

Stress can lead to poorer food and lifestyle choices, which puts more strain on the gut, and the cycle continues. Nurturing your gut can be a powerful way to support your mood and break this pattern.

Immune support

As we get older, the immune system becomes less efficient. A healthy gut microbiota is key to keeping our immune defences strong, helping us fight off illness and reduce chronic inflammation.

This is especially important for those living with inflammatory conditions such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, and during midlife, when hormonal changes — particularly the drop in oestrogen — can increase the risk of issues such as heart disease and osteoporosis.

Poor dietary choices can also fuel gut inflammation, raising the risk of bowel cancer, as well as insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure — all major risk factors for heart disease.

The bottom line is that nurturing your gut through mindful eating and

supportive lifestyle habits can have a positive ripple effect on your overall health.

TOP TIPS TO SUPPORT GUT HEALTH

Eat for your microbiome

A gut-friendly diet is all about variety and balance. Prioritising fibre is a great place to start — it helps sweep away toxins, eases sluggish digestion, and feeds your good gut bacteria. Aim to include a mix of leafy greens, beans, lentils, berries, nuts, seeds, and try using wholegrain rice and pasta.

Adding fermented foods such as live yoghurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi and miso can also give your gut a healthy dose of beneficial probiotics and support a diverse microbiome. Go slow with these because introducing them too quickly can cause temporary bloating as your gut adjusts.

Be mindful of heavily marketed probiotic drinks. Many of these are packed with added sugars, which can actually harm gut health rather than help it.

‘Small, consistent steps towards a gut-friendly lifestyle can make a big difference’

A Mediterranean-style diet is one of the best for your gut. Fill your plate with plenty of plant foods, oily fish, nuts, seeds, avocados and olive oil. These foods provide gut-friendly fibre, healthy fats, and lean proteins. Try to limit processed foods, sugary snacks, and too much red meat, as these can encourage harmful bacteria and increase gut inflammation.

Including protein with every meal, whether it is chicken, fish, legumes, quinoa, nuts or seeds — can help stabilise your energy, keep cravings in check, and support steady blood sugar levels.

A rainbow variety of fruits and vegetables not only support your gut but also provides essential vitamins and minerals that can boost skin, hair, joint and brain health. These foods also take less energy to digest and can help ease midlife symptoms such as hot flushes.

Manage stress

Chronic stress can upset the balance

of your gut bacteria and make digestive symptoms worse. Finding time for mindful practices such as yoga, meditation, deep breathing, or simply doing regular movement can help soothe your nervous system.

Move your body

Regular movement keeps things flowing through your digestive system, supports the metabolism, and helps maintain a healthy balance of gut bacteria. Walking, strength training, and balance exercises are particularly beneficial in midlife — for your gut and for protecting your bones and muscles.

Stay hydrated

Drinking enough water throughout the day supports digestion and helps maintain the protective lining of your intestines, essential for a healthy, well-functioning gut.

Consider hormone replacement therapy

We know that a fall in oestrogen levels disrupts the balance of the gut microbiota hormone replacement therapy can help restore this balance.

Be mindful of overusing antibiotics

Antibiotics are important when we need them, but they can wipe out the good

bacteria that keep your gut healthy. This can lead to digestive upsets, lower immunity, and allow harmful bacteria to grow. If you do need antibiotics, it is a good idea to support your gut during and after treatment with probiotic and fibre rich foods to help rebuild a healthy microbiome.

My take-home message

Small, consistent steps towards a gut-friendly lifestyle can make a big difference. By taking care of your gut, you are supporting better digestion and investing in your long-term health. If you are navigating hormonal changes, it can be helpful to speak to a specialist for support — we're here to help.

Dr Shilpa McQuillan leads the Berkshire Menopause Clinic in Henley and is an accredited menopause specialist, community gynaecologist and women's health GP.

For more information, email info@berkshirermenopauseclinic.com or visit www.berkshirermenopauseclinic.com