Three quarters of Brits risk gut diseases due to lack of diet variety

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Nearly three quarters of people in the UK buy the same foods in their weekly shop, limiting the diversity and health of their gut microbiome, according to a survey from Bowel Research UK.

The gut microbiome is the collection of bacteria, fungi and viruses that naturally live inside us. Diversity in your diet is linked to diversity of healthy bacteria in your gut, which is strongly associated with better overall health and protection from bowel diseases.

Bowel Research UK asked 2,000 people how often they buy the same ingredients in their grocery shop. Seventy four percent said they always or often buy the same ingredients.

Across all ages, 12% of people said they always buy the same ingredients, rising to 25% among people aged 18-25.

Reasons for the lack of variety included knowing what they like (61%), convenience (37%) and budget (31%). Younger people were less likely to cite knowing what they like (46%) when compared with all ages but were similarly concerned about convenience and budget as reasons for buying the same ingredients.

Dr Saliha Mahmood-Ahmed, NHS doctor, chef and winner of BBC's MasterChef competition in 2017, said: “Studies have shown that rather than focussing on ‘superfoods’, one of the best things you can do for your gut health is to eat a variety of plants, such as fruits, vegetables and grains. Research also shows that varying your choice of fruit and vegetables weekly, or seasonally, has an even more positive effect on your gut microbiome.

“It’s worrying to see that people are more likely to always buy the same ingredients due to convenience and budget – there are simple and cheap ways to enjoy different fruit and vegetables to help protect you from developing bowel diseases.”

Nearly half of respondents hadn’t heard of the gut microbiome, and only 28% of people over 65 had heard of it.

Lynn Dunne, CEO of Bowel Research UK, said: “Having a healthy gut microbiome has positive effects on so many aspects of health – from helping maintain a healthy weight and mental health to reducing the risk of bowel cancer and managing symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. It’s concerning that so many people are unaware of it, and it’s particularly worrying that people are less likely to have heard of it if they are over 65, which is when they are at higher risk of bowel diseases.

“We’ve created some top tips on affordable and easy ways to get variety into your diet to encourage good gut health, which we hope will encourage people to think about the importance of their gut microbiome.”

Research has shown that the gut microbiome has a role in many different conditions, and this also means it potentially offers new ways to treat diseases. It is a fast-growing but still under-researched area.

Bowel Research UK has launched an appeal for major donations to create a ringfenced pot of £250,000 for researchers to apply for PhDs or small grants for research on the gut microbiome. The appeal is being launched in conjunction with Bowel Research UK’s Microbiome Garden at RHS Chelsea Flower Show, which explores the link between a healthy landscape, a healthy gut and a healthy mind. It aims to inspire people to rewild their diets, gardens and their relationship with the land.

Dr James Kinross, Bowel Research UK’s microbiome clinical expert, said: “Ten years ago, research on the gut microbiome was seen as in its infancy and, despite it now being a hot topic in research, it is still a neglected niche when it comes to science funding. It’s great to see Bowel Research UK launching an appeal to fund microbiome research, particularly as the funding is targeted at researchers who are starting their careers who will bring fresh approaches to this exciting field.”

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Notes to editors:

To find out more about our microbiome grant funding appeal, or to make a donation, visit: https://www.bowelresearchuk.org/get-involved/microbiome-appeal/

The survey was conducted in February 2024 among 2,000 UK adults by OnePoll, on behalf of Bowel Research UK.

About Bowel Research UK

Bowel Research UK is funding life-changing research into bowel cancer and other bowel diseases. Every year over 16,000 people die from bowel cancer in the UK and over a million suffer from bowel disease. By researching cutting edge treatments and investing in the best science, we're saving and improving people's lives We're the UK's leading specialist bowel cancer and bowel disease research charity and our research is saving and improving lives. https://www.bowelresearchuk.org/

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