

Prebiotics boost your toddler's immune system - here's how

TODDLER

ARTICLE

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Both probiotics and prebiotics can boost children's immunity and restore the balance of bacteria in the gut. The key is to feed children with whole and fermented foods, rather than processed foods.

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You child's health depends a lot on a healthy gut. The digestive system not only makes proper nutrition possible, it also contributes to creating a strong immune system. In fact, about 70 per cent of the body's immune cells are located in the gut,¹ making it the largest single organ in the body's immune system!

In the first 1,000 days of a child's life, their gut and immune system develop rapidly. Thus, it's important to help them develop appropriately, as your baby faces an almost endless number of challenges to both systems that come with growing up.²

This is where nutrition plays a huge role: it helps influence the growth of gut microbiota, and helps to shape how your baby's gut and immune system develops. Prebiotics, in particular, have an important role in how this turns out.

What are prebiotics?

There are trillions of bacteria in our gut, some good and some not so great. Collectively, these are known as our gut microbiota.

Both probiotics and prebiotics help to restore the balance of bacteria in our gut so that the 'good' bacteria is always in control of our immune system. While probiotics are, themselves, a form of good bacteria that are introduced into the system, prebiotics are non-digestible food ingredients that act as fertilisers to stimulate the growth of good bacteria that are already present there.³

The good bacteria basically feeds on these prebiotics and then grow and reproduce, thus increasing their presence in the gut.

How do prebiotics help your child's immune system?

The good bacteria in your child's gut is their first line of defence against viruses, allergies and infections. Studies have indicated that prebiotics could play a part in decreasing the rate of infections in children aged between zero to 24 months.⁴

This means that your child will be less susceptible to, for example, viruses that they're exposed to when they're in a childcare environment or even when they're playing with other groups of children.

How can my toddler get their dose of prebiotics?

Your baby's immune health will benefit from formula milk supplemented with Human Milk Oligosaccharides (HMOs), as it's a prebiotic. Research shows that these HMOs have cognitive benefits for children, in addition to boosting their immune system.⁵ And, since milk is a very nutritious food, children are encouraged to continue to drink at least one serving of milk daily over 12 months. Drinking with HMOs may even help to support the development of your child's immune defence.

There are prebiotic foods that you can feed your toddler too. Fermented dairy products such as yogurt and kefir are good sources of prebiotics. And, if your child is older and adventurous with food, give them fermented foods like kimchi, sauerkraut, and kombucha. Other foods that contain prebiotics include leeks, garlic, bananas, onions, berries, tomatoes and soybeans. Legumes such as kidney beans, chickpeas and black beans are good sources too.⁶

The key is to feed your child more whole and fermented foods, and less of processed foods. Giving them 'real' food is beneficial for their gut, so give your toddler a good mix of these foods to keep their immune system in peak condition.

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