



Expatriate gut health survey report

May 2024



Our Nutrition Hub was created with expat gut health in mind.

Introduction

Moving abroad can mean big lifestyle changes for expats – especially in their diet and gut health routines. From different ingredients and cooking styles, to eating out more and cooking less, these changes in nutrition habits can often result in changes in digestion and increased symptoms of gut issues.

It can be difficult for expats to keep up a healthy routine when moving to another country. Long hours in a new job paired with the pressures of blending into a new culture often means that exercise and healthy eating are pushed aside in favour of fast food, higher alcohol intake and less time for self-care.

Our Nutrition Hub was created with expat gut health in mind. We want to give expats the information they need to lead healthier, more gut-friendly lives in their resident countries. But we were curious – how exactly are expats faring with their gut health? What is their daily diet like? Are they experiencing more gut issues since moving abroad? And what are their concerns about their gut health in the future?

We decided to take these questions to expats and conduct a survey to give us a picture of expat gut health around the world. With over 3,000 expats surveyed, we uncovered key concerns around nutrition, and how attitudes to gut health can change by moving internationally.

Methodology

Allianz Care, in collaboration with dentsu, surveyed 3,015 adults between October 9th and December 21st, 2023. The survey was open to subscribers to our Health Matters newsletter and visitors to our website, aiming to capture a diverse range of expat experiences and perspectives. Here is an overview of the demographics of the respondents:

Gender

The majority of respondents identified as male (58%), with 41% female.



Age group

Most respondents were in the 35-44 age bracket (30%), followed by 25-34 (26%) and 45-54 (20%).



Marital status

43% of our respondents were married, with 23% having children. 12% said they were in a relationship, with 21% listed as single.



Length of time living abroad

There was a wide gap between time periods spent living abroad in our respondents. 37% have lived away from their home country for over five years, while 35% have lived away for less than six months.



Home country

The countries our respondents are originally from include:

- Britain (13.5%)
- India (12.8%)
- Philippines (8.1%)
- USA (7%)

We also surveyed respondents from Kenya, Italy, Singapore, Netherlands, Germany, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa, among others



Resident country

The countries our respondents have moved to include:

- Britain (8.8%)
- Switzerland (8.4%)
- Singapore (7.2%)
- UAE (6.9%)
- Germany (5.75%)

Respondents also listed living in Qatar, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Netherlands, Cyprus, Greece, among others.

Key insights

Building on the key insights obtained from the survey, this section delves deeper into the prevalence of gut health symptoms among expats and their impact on daily life.

77%

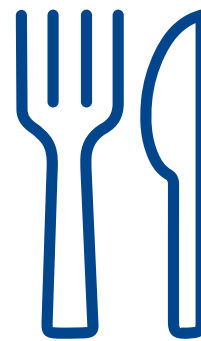
of expats reported that their digestive symptoms **negatively** affected their quality of life

46%

of expats experience **stress-related** stomach problems



Despite widespread gut health concerns, only 12% of expats follow a specialised diet to help with gut health issues



Expats report eating **more of every type of food group** in their home country than their resident country, except one – processed and convenience foods

Expats faced challenges in sourcing familiar foods, with 10% describing the task as 'very difficult or impossible' in their new location



42% of expats said that their gut health has become more important to them since moving abroad, reflecting a heightened awareness of well-being

42%

Section 1: Gut Health Symptoms: investigate the frequency of common gut-related issues among expats and their effects on daily living

The gut microbiome is home to the largest number of microbes in the human body, and plays a crucial role in digestion, immune system support and nutrient absorption. When the gut becomes unhealthy or disrupted, it can cause issues like changes to stool quality, bloating and painful cramping, and diarrhoea and constipation.

Travelling and getting used to new foods as an expat can easily disrupt the microbiome, with many of our respondents experiencing gut health problems on a regular basis. The most common issue was bloating, with over 40% of our respondents experiencing this more than 3 times a week. 34% experienced a large

variation in stools from day to day, while 20% experienced frequent coughs, colds and viruses. All these symptoms can be indicators of a less-than-optimal gut environment.

Suffering with daily gut symptoms can have a real impact on expats' wellbeing. 77% of expats surveyed said that their digestive symptoms were negatively affecting their life. Respondents were given a scale to rate the impact of their digestive symptoms (1 being little to no impact, 10 being high impact, like extreme pain or being unable to leave the house). 53% rated their symptoms as a 5 or higher.

What's more, 46% of expats said that they experienced stress-related stomach problems often. This shows that expats can often be caught in a cycle of poor gut health – where dealing with uncomfortable symptoms can result in stress, which in turn feeds into an unhappy gut.

This section reveals that gut health issues like bloating and inconsistent stool irregularities are common among expats and can seriously interfere with their daily routines. Stress worsens symptoms, creating a harmful cycle. Prioritising dietary changes and stress reduction is essential for addressing this and enhancing resilience and well-being in the face of relocation challenges.

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Section 2: Lifestyle and Diet: explore expats' eating patterns, supplement usage, and adoption of specialised diets to manage gut health challenges

To remedy symptoms of an unhealthy microbiome, many people follow restricted diets to cut out any foods that may irritate the gut. Common diets include going gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free, or following a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Despite reporting varied gut health issues and the negative effect these can have on daily life, the vast majority of our respondents (88%) did not follow a specialised diet because of their gut health issues. What's more, only 27% take any kind of gut health supplements (probiotics, vitamins, herbal teas etc.)

Supplements, especially probiotics, can be a great way to improve gut issues, but there are many factors to consider when choosing the right one. Nutritionist Eli Brecher explores some of these factors in her blog around probiotics, which you can find [here](#).

A healthy lifestyle can have a large impact on gut health and overall wellbeing. We asked expats about their daily routines and how healthy they would consider their habits. Some interesting responses included:

- 70% reported getting between 6-8 hours of sleep a night
- 54% try to keep a varied diet, with 16% saying their diet is 'very varied', and 30% saying they eat the same foods every day
- 44% don't drink alcohol, with 31% having 1-2 drinks a week
- 54% drink 1-2 litres of water a day (the advised amount is between 3 to 4 litres)
- 54% have fast food once a week

This section sheds light on expats' dietary habits and lifestyle choices, offering insights into their impact on gut health. To stress the importance of a balanced lifestyle in managing gut health, we can highlight how certain lifestyle choices correlate with gut health outcomes, such as regular exercise, sufficient sleep, and a varied, nutrient-rich diet.

54%

54%

try to keep a varied diet



Section 3: Dietary Changes Post-relocation: examine alterations in dietary choices following relocation and their impact on digestive well-being

Many expats experience a significant change in lifestyle when moving abroad, which can in turn have a large impact on their digestive health. Different foods and methods of preparation and cooking, paired with different schedules and cultures around food and drink can all contribute to changes in digestion.

We listed several food categories and asked expats if they ate more of them in their home or resident country. In almost every category, our respondents reported eating more of each food in their home country as opposed to their current country of residence. Except one - processed and convenience foods, which ranked slightly higher for consumption in the resident country. Healthier options like fresh fruit, leafy greens, root vegetables, brassicas, legumes and grains all ranked higher for consumption in home countries rather than new residences.

21% of respondents indicated that about 30-50% of their diet has changed since moving country. 34% said they had made small changes, amounting to about a 10-30% difference in diet, while 36% reported having the same diet as before they moved. 10% of respondents said that sourcing the foods they used to eat in their home country was 'very difficult or impossible' in their new home.

This change in diet can result in a noticeable difference in digestive habits. Expats were asked whether they had noticed any digestive health symptoms appearing or worsening since moving abroad. The most common responses were weight gain (20%), bloating (11%), and weight loss (10%).

However, access to new foods and lifestyles can also spur a positive change in gut health and wellness. Many respondents reported enjoying

a healthier lifestyle since moving country, with some common reasons including:

- Less sugar and processed foods
- Reduced alcohol intake
- Increased water intake
- Increased amounts of green vegetables and fruit
- A more varied and balanced diet
- More time to walk and exercise

This section outlines shifts in dietary patterns post-relocation and their implications for expats' digestive well-being. To assist expats in navigating these changes, we can offer practical suggestions like incorporating local foods, maintaining dietary diversity, and prioritising gut-friendly options.



Section 4: Attitudes for the Future: analyse expats' shifting attitudes toward gut health and their concerns about future well-being

As we get older or our circumstances change, our attitudes towards our health may evolve and develop. Keeping ourselves as healthy as possible becomes more of a priority for many of us, including expats.

We asked respondents to describe their overall attitude towards their gut health. 41% said that they thought about gut health intermittently, while 32% said gut health was very important to them.

Interestingly, 42% of expats said that their gut health has become more important to them since moving abroad.

Because gut health can be a contributor to many health issues, we asked our respondents what their main concerns were for their future gut health. Answers included:

- Obesity (19%)
- Cancer (18%)
- Daily symptoms of poor gut health (bloating, diarrhoea, etc.) (17%)
- Mental health (14%)
- Autoimmune issues (13%)
- Environmental factors (9%)

To summarise these findings and their implications, we can emphasise the importance of addressing expats' gut health concerns and adapting strategies to support their unique needs, promoting proactive measures for expat health and well-being.

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Section 5: Breakdown by Resident Country

Our survey also looked at how digestive habits differ from one home country background to another. Depending on a respondent's background, they may consume more of one food group than another or may experience more digestive symptoms when moving country. We analysed the data to see how responses varied when it came to digestive symptoms and habits depending on their new resident country.

We began by looking at some of our most popular resident countries: the UK (8.8%), Switzerland (8.4%), Singapore (7.2%), UAE (6.9%) and Germany (5.75%). We compared some of these countries' top answers to some of our most comprehensive questions – here's how they measured up.

Most common symptom

The most common digestive symptom across the board for our respondents was bloating, with each of our top countries experiencing it often.

| Country | Response |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| United Kingdom | 41% experience bloating 3+ a week |
| Switzerland | 50% experience bloating 3+ a week |
| Singapore | 50% experience bloating 3+ a week |
| United Arab Emirates | 50% experience bloating 3+ a week |
| Germany | 50% experience bloating 3+ a week |

Impact of digestive symptoms on daily life

Most of the respondents living in our top countries agreed that painful or uncomfortable digestive symptoms had a negative impact on their daily lives. What's more, all of our respondents living in the UAE reported a negative impact on their day-to-day life from poor gut health.

| Country | Response |
|----------------------|---|
| United Kingdom | 54% say it negatively affects their life |
| Switzerland | 75% say it negatively affects their life |
| Singapore | 68% say it negatively affects their life |
| United Arab Emirates | 100% say it negatively affects their life |
| Germany | 77% say it negatively affects their life |

Stress-related stomach issues

One of the most worrying trends from our survey was the level of stress-related stomach issues reported. Over half of our respondents living in Switzerland confirmed they experienced this issue, with our other top countries also having high instances.

| Country | Response |
|----------------------|--|
| United Kingdom | 40% experience stress-related stomach issues |
| Switzerland | 52% experience stress-related stomach issues |
| Singapore | 48% experience stress-related stomach issues |
| United Arab Emirates | 47% experience stress-related stomach issues |
| Germany | 49% experience stress-related stomach issues |

Specialised diets

One of the most interesting stats from our survey was that, despite so many respondents dealing with daily digestive issues, very few chose to follow a specialised diet to help. This was confirmed in our top responding resident countries, who all reported a very low number of specialised diets. Expats living in Switzerland showed the highest rate of specialised diets, at 18.5% of respondents – still less than one in five - with the other countries reporting that less than one in ten have specialised diets to manage their gut health.

| Country | Response |
|----------------------|---|
| United Kingdom | 8.5% eat a specialised diet due to digestive health issues |
| Switzerland | 18.5% eat a specialised diet due to digestive health issues |
| Singapore | 8.5% eat a specialised diet due to digestive health issues |
| United Arab Emirates | 6% eat a specialised diet due to digestive health issues |
| Germany | 9% eat a specialised diet due to digestive health issues |

Changes in diet from home to resident country

We also looked at whether respondents had seen any drastic changes in their diet from home to resident country. Many responses were evenly split, but some showed some interesting shifts, as detailed below. For example, 54% of expats living in Singapore eat less dairy and poultry there than they did at home.

| Country | Response |
|----------------------|---|
| United Kingdom | 54% eat more processed/fast food in their resident country than at home |
| Switzerland | 56% eat more processed/fast food in their resident country than at home |
| Singapore | 54% eat more sugary foods; poultry; dairy; and root vegetables at home than in their resident country |
| United Arab Emirates | 63% eat more processed/fast food in their resident country than at home. |
| Germany | 61% eat more processed/fast food in their resident country than at home |

Attitudes to gut health and concerns for the future

Finally, we wanted to know how our respondents felt about gut health moving towards the future. Interestingly, respondents' top concerns tended to differ depending on where they are now based – most cited daily symptoms of poor gut health as their top concern, while those based in Germany cited mental health concerns, and those in the UAE cited obesity.

| Country | Response |
|----------------------|---|
| United Kingdom | 38% say gut health is more important since moving Daily symptoms of gut discomfort are the biggest concern (22%) |
| Switzerland | 49% say gut health is more important since moving Daily symptoms of gut discomfort are the biggest concern (21%) |
| Singapore | 34% say gut health is more important since moving Cancer is the biggest concern (22%) |
| United Arab Emirates | 52% say gut health is more important since moving Obesity is the biggest concern (19%) |
| Germany | 48% say gut health is more important since moving Mental health is the biggest concern (23%) |

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Conclusion

It's clear that gut health is a growing concern for both expats and non-expats around the world. With the number of expats surveyed who complain of digestive problems, and express that these are affecting their daily lives, a change needs to be made to remedy these issues.

Our Nutrition Hub can help expats get to know their gut and make better choices for their microbiome and overall health. Nutritionist Eli Brecher makes several recommendations for expats to improve their gut health in her dedicated blog series. These include:

1. Dietary changes

- Increase fibre intake: Consume more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.
- Diversify diet: Include a variety of colourful foods for a range of nutrients.
- Incorporate fermented foods: Consume yogurt, kefir, kimchi, and sauerkraut for probiotics.

2. Lifestyle Modifications

- Manage stress levels: Practice mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and regular exercise.
- Prioritise sleep: Establish a consistent sleep schedule and create a conducive sleep environment.
- Increasing exercise: Incorporate regular physical activity into daily routines.

3. Mindful Eating Practices

- Adopt mindful eating: Slow down during meals and pay attention to hunger and fullness cues.
- Avoid overeating: Practice portion control to prevent discomfort.

4. Gut Health Supplements

- Consider probiotics: Explore probiotic supplements or probiotic-rich foods to support gut health.
- Consult healthcare professionals: Seek advice from nutritionists or gastroenterologists for personalised guidance.

5. Cultural Adaptation

- Adaptation tips: Find alternatives to familiar foods and seek community support for cultural adjustments.

In addressing the gut health concerns of expats, it's essential to recognise the multifaceted nature of their experiences. Cultural backgrounds significantly influence dietary preferences, meal preparation methods, and perceptions of health, underscoring the need for tailored approaches to support expats' well-being. By acknowledging and embracing cultural diversity, we can better address the unique nutritional challenges faced by expats worldwide.

You can find more information on improving and maintaining gut health on the [Nutrition Hub](#).