

HAPPY GUT HEALTHY PREGNANCY HEALTHY BABY

*A gut microbiome nutrition plan for
moms-to-be to support digestion, boost immunity, and
nurture baby's development*

JOSEPH SARACINO MD

**HAPPY GUT, HEALTHY PREGNANCY,
HEALTHY BABY**

**A GUT MICROBIOME NUTRITION PLAN FOR MOMS-TO-BE TO
SUPPORT DIGESTION, BOOST IMMUNITY, AND NURTURE
BABY'S DEVELOPMENT**

by Joseph Saracino MD

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all mothers and mothers-to-be, whose strength and love shape the generations to come.

With heartfelt Thanks to my wonderful wife, Christine, and my beautiful children for making this book possible and believing in me.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
How to Make the Most of This Book	3
Part I — Foundations of Gut Health in Pregnancy	5
Chapter 1 — Gut Microbiome & Pregnancy Basics	6
Chapter 2 — The Gut–Brain–Pregnancy Connection.....	13
Chapter 3 — Pre-Pregnancy Gut Prep for Fertility	19
Chapter 4 — Microbiome & Baby’s Development.....	24
Part II — Troubleshooting Gut Challenges in Pregnancy.....	30
Chapter 5 — Morning Sickness & Nausea.....	31
Chapter 6 — Gut Health & Heartburn.....	37
Chapter 7 — Cravings & Appetite Changes	39
Chapter 8 — Constipation & Bloating.....	44
Chapter 9 — Gut Health & Weight Management In Pregnancy	49
Chapter 10 — Gut Health & Skin Changes	52
Chapter 11 — The Morning Sickness Survival Playbook: Step-By-Step Strategies For Managing Nausea	54
Part III – Microbial Rhythms: Sleep, Mood & Momentum.....	60
Chapter 12 — Gut Health & Sleep.....	61
Chapter 13 — Gut Health & Mood Regulation	66
Chapter 14 — Gut Health & Energy Levels.....	68
Part IV — Gut Health & Pregnancy Outcomes.....	71
Chapter 15 - Gut Health & Gestational Diabetes	72
Chapter 16 — Gut Health & Preeclampsia Risk	78
Chapter 17 — Gut Health & Preterm Birth Risk.....	85
Part V – Gut Health and Your Immune System	88

Chapter 18 — Gut Health & Immunity	89
Chapter 19 — Inflammation & Autoimmune Concerns	94
Chapter 20 — Healing Your Gut After Antibiotic Use.....	99
Part VI — Long-Term Health for Mom & Baby	103
Chapter 21 — Delivery Method & Baby’s Microbiome.....	104
Chapter 22 – Postpartum Gut Recovery.....	109
Chapter 23 – Long-Term Gut Wellness for Mom & Baby	114
Chapter 24 — The Future of Gut Microbiome Research.....	118
Conclusion — Strong Foundations for a Healthy Pregnancy (and Beyond)	122
Frequently Asked Questions — Gut Health & Pregnancy	126
Bibliography / References.....	131
APPENDIX Meal Plans for a Healthy Gut	138
Gut-Friendly Recipes	141
About the Author	146

Introduction

Pregnancy is one of the most extraordinary and life-changing experiences a woman can go through. It is such a special time of joy and anticipation, but it also brings a whole slew of changes that affect nearly every system in the body. While you may notice visible signs, like a growing belly, swollen feet, that certain glow, and lack of energy, you might be surprised to learn that some of the most important changes are happening silently inside your digestive system, specifically your large intestine or colon—which we'll refer to in this book as the gut.

Your gut health—namely the delicate balance of bacteria and other microorganisms living in your intestines—has a huge influence on your pregnancy journey and your baby's long-term well-being. That sounds scary, but it's actually a good thing, as you'll see as you continue to read more.

As a Gastroenterologist who has been in practice for over 30 years, I know the digestive system inside and out—literally. There are many books out there that deal with gut health, but few that address the unique situation that occurs during pregnancy. Therefore, I wanted to write this book about a very special group of women—the expectant mothers of the world. I dedicate this book to all of you, Moms. My goal is to bring cutting-edge science to you so that we can apply it towards everyday practical routines such as diet, stress management, and sleep.

For decades, doctors believed digestion was just about breaking down food and absorbing nutrients. Today, science has revealed something truly amazing: your gut is home to a complex ecosystem of trillions (one hundred trillion, to be exact!) of bacteria, fungi, and other tiny organisms known as the **GUT MICROBIOME**. It's what keeps your gut healthy. In fact, as you'll learn, the gut is as important to our health and well-being as the brain and liver are—two other vital organs. Who would have thought that the microbiome had such a tremendous impact on our bodies and even on babies' healthy development, as they grow within the womb?

During pregnancy, your microbiome doesn't sit still, and it does a lot more than just help you digest food. It interacts with your immune system, your hormones, and even your brain. It affects how your body stores energy, regulates blood sugar, and processes nutrients for your baby's growth. It even remodels itself to support the development of a brand-new human. Perhaps most fascinating of all: **your microbiome is one of the first gifts you pass on to your child.**

In this book, we'll explore how to nurture your microbiome step by step, what foods and habits strengthen it, and how to manage the common gut challenges that come with pregnancy. Every bite you eat and every lifestyle habit you develop influences this inner world and, therefore, influences your pregnancy.

So many expecting moms struggle with bloating, constipation, and heartburn. Many worry about whether it's safe to take a probiotic, or what foods might help or harm their gut and their growing baby. You may feel anxious about what's best for your baby. It's easy to feel lost in a maze of conflicting advice—especially nowadays with Dr. Internet. If you've ever felt frustrated that no one seems to have clear answers, **you are not alone.**

By understanding and supporting your gut health, you're not just making pregnancy more comfortable—you're setting up both yourself and your baby for a healthier future.

Let's move forward, one step at a time, towards a healthier, more vibrant you—and a thriving baby. The answers you've been searching for are here. I am honored to be your guide on this remarkable journey.

How to Make the Most of This Book

To make this journey as helpful as possible, I've organized the book into **six main parts**. Each one highlights a different aspect of gut health during pregnancy, so you can easily find the information most relevant to you:

1. Understanding the Gut Microbiome:

Let's start with the basic facts—what exactly is the gut microbiome, and why has it become such a buzzword? I'll walk you through the science in plain English, so that you can feel confident about the powerful ecosystem inside your body.

2. Troubleshooting Gut Challenges:

From one doctor (and parent!) to another parent-to-be: I know how frustrating it can be to deal with nausea, heartburn, constipation, and bloating. I'll share with you the tried-and-true strategies I use in my practice, along with a few tips I wish someone had told me years ago.

3. Lifestyle and Stress Management:

Through the years, I've seen how much sleep, stress, and physical activity affect gut health—especially during pregnancy. Here, I'll share simple ways that really help (and what's just hype), and offer easy adjustments you can make right away.

4. Pregnancy Outcomes:

You'll discover how keeping your gut in balance may help lower risks such as gestational diabetes and pre-term birth. My goal is to give you the facts—and some peace of mind—so that you and your baby have the best possible start.

5. Gut Health and Your Immune System:

This section explores a topic especially close to my heart as a gastroenterologist: how the gut and immune system talk to each other.

I'll share what I see in my patients and what the latest science says about keeping your immune system strong during pregnancy.

6. Delivery and Postpartum Gut Health for You and Your Baby:

Delivering your baby is not the end of the story! I'll walk you through what happens to your gut during delivery and postpartum, and how you can set yourself—and your baby—up for a healthy start in those precious early days.

In these chapters, you'll see **Tip Boxes**—these are practical suggestions intended for busy expecting parents. Unlike other pregnancy books, though, these tips are always backed by explanations in the text.

In addition, since pregnancy isn't the same for every woman, I've added **Case Notes** to bring the science to life—short examples of how other expecting moms successfully improved their gut health.

Check out the **Frequently Asked Questions** at the end of the book for helpful answers to questions you might have about Pregnancy and Gut Health.

Read this book straight through or skip right to the sections that matter to you right now.

As a Bonus, I have also **included an Appendix** outlining easy and delicious meal plans and recipes to help you strengthen your gut microbiome during your pregnancy.

A Respectful Disclaimer

This book is designed to **educate and empower**, but it's **not a substitute for medical advice**. Always consult your healthcare provider before making significant changes to your diet, supplements, or medications, especially during pregnancy.

Part I — Foundations of Gut Health in Pregnancy

Every pregnancy starts with a foundation of health that shapes both mom's journey and baby's development. In recent years, researchers have discovered that the gut microbiome plays a vital role in laying that foundation. Far from being just a food processor, the gut is now understood as an active partner in absorbing nutrients, regulating hormones, and balancing the immune system.

Recent studies highlight that women who enter pregnancy with a balanced, diverse/diversified gut microbiome experience smoother adjustments to their metabolism, more stable weight gain, and fewer complications. On the other hand, when the gut is not healthy, before or during early pregnancy, it can influence everything from morning sickness severity to nutrient deficiencies.

This section introduces the core concepts of gut health during pregnancy. You'll learn:

- How trillions of gut microbes interact with digestion, hormones, and immunity.
- Why dietary diversity in early pregnancy is so crucial for both mother and baby.
- The impact of lifestyle factors like stress, sleep, and movement on the gut microbiome.
- How the gut microbiome even affects fertility.

By having a strong foundation, mothers can better adapt to the changes of pregnancy and support their baby's growth in ways that extend well beyond those nine months. The chapters in this section provide the building blocks for understanding the microbiome's role and how small, consistent choices and changes create lasting benefits for mom and baby.

Chapter 1 — Gut Microbiome & Pregnancy Basics

What Is the Gut Microbiome (and Why It Matters)?

Your gut is home to 100 trillion microbes—mostly bacteria—that help digest food, harvest nutrients, produce vitamins, regulate immune responses, and send signals to your brain. During pregnancy, this complex ecosystem becomes even more important. A balanced, diverse microbiome can support steadier energy, more comfortable digestion, and healthier metabolism. An imbalanced one (often called dysbiosis) can be associated with symptoms like bloating or constipation and with risks such as gestational diabetes, preterm birth, or a lot of inflammation. Not all bacteria are equal, though. Some help; others cause problems if they dominate. It's the variety or diversity that's essential.

Think of your microbes as tiny teammates. Feed them well, and they will definitely help your body adapt to the remarkable demands of pregnancy.

How Pregnancy Changes Your Gut

Pregnancy naturally shifts your microbiome. Hormones rise, digestion slows down, and your immune system rebalances so your body can welcome a growing baby. These shifts are normal—and they're one reason symptoms like nausea, constipation, or those well-known unusual cravings are common.

Research shows that by the third trimester, your gut microbiome is very different than when you conceived.

Four predictable changes

1. Slightly slower motility. Food moves more slowly through the gut. This helps you absorb more nutrients, but it can also contribute to constipation or bloating.

2. The diversity of gut bacteria decreases, but good bacteria such as Bifidobacteria increase. They help to reduce inflammation and nourish your gut lining. Lactobacillus, by producing lactic acid, makes the microbiome an unfriendly environment for the bad bacteria. A few bad bacteria are necessary to train the immune system, but when they take over, that's when problems arise.

3. The gut microbes start extracting more nutrients from food—helping your baby grow.

4. Your body adapts to a mild and healthy inflammation state, preparing for delivery.

None of these changes is necessarily “good” or “bad.” They’re simply a normal part of pregnancy. The food you choose, the level of hydration, your body movement, and stress management shape how comfortable the journey feels.

Hormones, Immunity & the Gut

Pregnancy hormones are powerful conductors:

- Progesterone relaxes smooth muscles (hello, slower gut), which may raise constipation risk.
- Estrogen influences fluid balance and can affect nausea early on.
- Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG) peaks in the first trimester and is linked to classic morning sickness.

Your immune system also resets itself. Rather than going “up” or “down,” it shifts toward tolerance, so your body supports a non-self (your baby) while still defending you from illness. The microbiome is part of this fine-tuning: gut microbes train immune cells, help maintain the gut barrier, and produce compounds (like Short Chain Fatty Acids: SCFAs) that calm excessive inflammation. A stable immune environment is beneficial for you and also supports baby’s developing defenses.

The Food–Microbe Partnership

Microbes love fiber—especially fermentable types in beans, oats, onions, garlic, bananas, berries, apples, and many vegetables. When they digest fiber, they make short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) that:

- Support insulin sensitivity (steadier blood sugar)
- Strengthen the gut lining (less irritation)
- Communicate with immune cells (less overreacting)

Here’s the latest research about the gut microbiome during pregnancy:

- Recent studies show that maternal gut microbes have an impact on the growth of your baby and brain development as early as the first trimester.
- Also, they suggest that diversity of microbes, not just abundance, predicts healthier pregnancy outcomes.
- When gut health is optimized early on, it may influence the development of the placenta and your growing baby’s immune system, allowing for a healthier long-term outcome as an infant.
- Optimizing gut health early may influence the development of the placenta and the fetal immune system, allowing for healthier long-term outcomes as an infant.

Daily Nutrition Foundations:

- Aim for 25–30 g of fiber/day (work up to that amount gradually; increase water as you add fiber).
- Eat protein with every meal/snack (helps with nausea, energy, and blood sugar).
- Stay hydrated: 8–10 cups of water or other liquid/day; more if it’s hot outside or you’re active.

- **Diversifying your gut microbiome through food:** Eat 20–30 different plants/week (count fruits, veggies, beans, grains, nuts, seeds, herbs).

If this sounds like a lot, start small: add one extra fruit or vegetable per day, swap white grains for whole grains a few times per week, and include a protein-rich snack when you feel wobbly.

Practical “Gut First” Meal Pattern (Example Day)

- **Upon Waking (if nauseated):** A few dry crackers or a small protein bite (like a cheese stick or a spoon of Greek yogurt).
- **Breakfast:** Oatmeal cooked in milk (or fortified plant milk) with blueberries and chia; a side of scrambled egg.
- **Mid-morning:** Apple slices with peanut butter, or kefir with cinnamon.
- **Lunch:** Whole-grain wrap with rotisserie chicken or chickpeas, leafy greens, avocado, and a yogurt-based dressing.
- **Afternoon:** A handful of nuts and a clementine, or hummus with carrots.
- **Dinner:** Baked salmon (or tofu) with quinoa, roasted carrots, and a big side salad.
- **Evening:** Ginger tea; if hungry, plain yogurt with a drizzle of honey.

So, combine fiber with protein (eggs, fish, poultry, tofu, Greek yogurt, beans) and healthy fats (olive oil, avocado, nuts) to reduce glucose spikes and stay satisfied longer. This simple trio—fiber + protein + healthy fat—is the backbone of gut-friendly meals in pregnancy.

Hydration Is So Important

Plain water is essential. So are diluted juices, broths, herbal teas like ginger or peppermint, and water-rich foods (cucumbers, citrus,

melons). If nausea is intense, try tiny sips with a pinch of salt and a splash of juice for electrolytes.

Movement Helps Your Microbiome

Exercise (as approved by your provider) supports motility and gut microbiome balance. Short walks after meals, light prenatal yoga, and easy strength sessions a few times per week can reduce bloating, improve sleep, and give you more energy.

Stress, Sleep & the Gut–Brain Loop

Stress can change gut motility and microbial activity; gut discomfort can raise stress as a result. Build small buffers:

- 5 slow breaths before meals
- A 10–15 minute walk in daylight
- A wind-down routine: dim lights, screen-off time, consistent bedtime

Even tiny routines improve digestion and mood over time.

Smart Swaps (Without Food Fear)

- Instead of sugary drinks → Try sparkling water with citrus or a splash of juice
- Instead of ultra-refined snacks → Try nuts, fruit + yogurt, or popcorn + cheese
- Instead of skipping meals (then overeating) → Try protein mini-meals every 3–4 hours

No food is “off limits.” You’re just aiming for more of the helpful stuff, more often.

Common Pitfalls (And Quick Fixes)

- If you start right away with too much fiber, that leads to gas/bloat. → Fix: add fiber slowly and drink more water.

- If you rely on salads only, that's not enough protein or calories. → Fix: add eggs, beans, chicken, tofu, or fish.
- If you cut carbs too quickly, that leads to low energy + nausea. → Fix: choose slow carbs (oats, quinoa, beans) with protein.
- If you're trying to eat healthy with veggies, they're harder to digest when nauseated. → Fix: lightly cook; add olive oil and salt.

Case Note — Building a Healthy Start

Kathy, in her first trimester, was feeling awful with nausea, heartburn, and fatigue. She wasn't eating a healthy diet—mostly take-out, frozen dinners, and salty snacks. After talking with her OB, she switched to a healthier, more nutritious diet that includes whole foods like fruits and vegetables, baked or grilled meats, nuts for snacks, and added yogurt and kefir. After about 2 weeks, she had a significant improvement in her symptoms and felt more energetic.

Tip Box — First Trimester Gut Boosters

- Eat at least 25g of fiber daily.
- Add probiotic foods (yogurt, miso, kimchi, sauerkraut) several times a week.
- Avoid excess sugar and processed foods that disrupt gut balance.
- Add one plant at breakfast (berries, spinach, tomato).
- Include protein at every meal/snack.
- Walk 10-15 minutes after your largest meal.

WHEN TO ASK YOUR PROVIDER

In case of intense abdominal pain, persistent vomiting, significant weight loss, constipation that doesn't respond to adding fiber to your diet, rectal bleeding, contact your care team. They know your history and can provide personalized support.

Chapter 1 Takeaways

- Your microbiome is a partner in digestion, immunity, and metabolism during pregnancy.
- Small, steady habits—**fiber + protein + hydration + movement**—support microbial balance and comfort.
- Aim for plant diversity week by week rather than perfection each day.
- Use simple stress and sleep routines to calm the gut–brain loop.

Chapter 2 — The Gut–Brain–Pregnancy Connection

Introduction: Why Your Gut Talks to Your Brain

Your gut and brain are in a constant conversation, and during pregnancy, that chat gets even louder. This occurs through an intricate network of nerves called the gut-brain axis. Think of it as a “superhighway” between your nervous system and your digestive system. Rising hormones, immune shifts, and microbiome changes influence everything from nausea to mood swings. Understanding this relationship helps you take small action steps to support mental and digestive health. Recent research is showing just how closely the gut and brain work together during pregnancy. This chapter explores how your gut and brain ‘talk,’ what the latest science says, and simple, mom-friendly tips to calm the chaos.

How the Gut Talks to the Brain

The gut communicates with your brain through three main pathways:

- 1. The Vagus Nerve:** A direct line carrying signals between the gut and the brain.
- 2. Neurotransmitters from Gut Microbes:** Bacteria produce serotonin, dopamine, and GABA, influencing mood.
- 3. Immune & Inflammatory Pathways:** Microbes help regulate inflammation, supporting brain chemistry.

Hormonal Shifts + Gut Changes = New Signals

Pregnancy hormones like estrogen, progesterone, and Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG) naturally change your gut activity and brain signaling. These shifts help explain why early pregnancy can trigger nausea, cravings, or unexpected food aversions.

Mood, Stress & the Gut

Gut microbes produce calming neurotransmitters, and stress can aggravate your digestion. A stress-gut feedback loop can worsen digestive issues and emotional changes. Mindful breathing, taking walks or gentle exercise, and slower meals can help.

Cravings, Aversions, and the Microbiome Connection

Your gut bacteria have an effect on cravings through chemical messengers. Feeding them fiber-rich, diverse foods helps balance these signals and cut down on extreme cravings or aversions to food. Also, because rising hormones like progesterone and estrogen naturally slow digestion, this affects how these signals flow. This explains why one day you might crave salty chips, the next you can't stand the smell of eggs, and by bedtime, you're queasy again. It's your body adjusting — perfectly normal, even if uncomfortable.

Your gut bacteria also produce short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) — small compounds made when they digest fiber — that help regulate inflammation and support your brain's chemistry.

Moms with higher gut diversity in early pregnancy report about 35% fewer nausea episodes compared to Moms with less diversity. Women with more SCFA-producing bacteria tend to experience steadier moods and lower anxiety levels, since SCFAs help regulate serotonin production. Certain probiotics, especially *Lactobacillus* strains, may reduce cortisol — the body's main stress hormone — which benefits gut-brain balance.

Morning Sickness & the Gut-Brain Loop

Morning sickness affects almost 70% of pregnant women. While hormones cause most of it, gut bacteria also influence nausea signals.

Small, protein-rich meals and stable blood sugar levels often help reduce symptoms.

Let's dive deeper into how the gut and brain work together during pregnancy.

You may ask: Why does my gut affect my mood? It's because 90% of serotonin — your 'feel-good' chemical — is made in the gut. When digestion slows down or your microbiome shifts during pregnancy, serotonin signals to the brain can drop, making you more sensitive to stress and mood swings. Supporting gut health through balanced eating, hydration, mindful breathing, and gentle movement can restore better balance between your gut and brain.

Pregnancy nausea isn't always just a 'morning' thing. Timing matters, and having a better understanding of your patterns can help. Morning nausea is often triggered by low blood sugar after fasting overnight, so eating a small protein-carb snack within 30 minutes of waking can ease symptoms. Afternoon nausea usually occurs because of dehydration or low energy levels, which you can manage by pairing fruit with nuts or yogurt and sipping water steadily. Evening nausea can be linked to slower digestion, acid reflux, and food regurgitation. Lighter dinners earlier in the evening and waiting to go to bed 3-4 hours after meals may help. At night, melatonin slows down gut motility, causing food to linger longer; a simple protein-based snack like Greek yogurt and a sip of peppermint tea before bed can make a difference.

What you eat also shapes your gut-brain connection. Bananas, oats, chickpeas, and pumpkin seeds provide tryptophan, a building block for serotonin — that 'feel-good' brain chemical again. These foods are also packed full of magnesium, which relaxes intestinal muscles and reduces cramping. Salmon, walnuts, and olive oil deliver omega-3 fatty acids that reduce inflammation and improve how the gut and brain communicate. Ginger tea, peppermint, and lemon water soothe a queasy stomach and support hormonal balance, whereas probiotic

foods like kefir, Greek yogurt, kimchi, miso, and sauerkraut strengthen your gut lining and stabilize energy levels. Start with just one food from these groups at a time to learn what works best for your body. Surprisingly enough, belly breathing — inhaling for five seconds, holding for five, then exhaling for five — activates the vagus nerve, calming gut-brain stress loops and easing nausea.

Remember: since your brain and gut constantly send signals back and forth, even small daily habits can make a huge difference.

Here are some helpful tips to maximize your gut microbiome.

How to Strengthen the Gut–Brain Axis

Four strategies strengthen this pathway:

1. Feed your microbes — Include prebiotic fiber and fermented foods.
2. Support stable blood sugar — Pair protein + fiber.
3. Prioritize restful sleep — Gut microbes follow circadian rhythms.
4. Manage stress gently — Yoga, walks, exercise, and breathing exercises send calming signals.

Microbiome-Friendly Foods for Mood & Energy

Examples include:

- Greek yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso (probiotics)
- Oats & bananas (serotonin precursors)
- Pumpkin seeds (zinc-rich)
- Salmon & walnuts (omega-3)
- Dark leafy greens (magnesium)

Your Daily Routine to Calm Gut-Brain Signals

A simple daily framework:

- **Morning:** Hydrate, a protein-rich snack such as nuts, yogurt, cottage cheese, or protein shakes.
- **Midday:** Move after meals, walk, exercise.
- **Afternoon:** Balanced snacks.
- **Evening:** Light dinner + calming tea.
- **Bedtime:** Consistent sleep routine.
- Try to fit in Mindful Breathing at least once a day with the 5-5-5 rule: (5-second deep breath in; hold for 5 seconds; breath out for 5 seconds)

Case Note

Allie's Story — At 14 weeks, Allie struggled with constant nausea and mood swings. With her OB's guidance, she made four small changes: added Greek yogurt to breakfast, swapped crackers for almonds and berries, practiced daily 5-5-5 breathing, and switched her afternoon coffee for ginger tea. Within two weeks, her nausea episodes dropped from five times a day to once or twice a week, and she felt more energetic. Now, Allie's solution may not work for everyone, but it shows how small, consistent steps can make a significant impact.

WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL GUIDANCE

Consult your provider if you have severe nausea, intense mood changes, or significant nutritional gaps. Your healthcare team can help you with treatment options.

Chapter 2 Takeaways

- The gut-brain axis is a two-way communication system affecting digestion, cravings, and mood.
- Gut microbes produce serotonin and other neurotransmitters that influence emotional balance.
- Hormones naturally shift gut-brain signals during pregnancy.
- Support gut-brain health with balanced meals, sleep, movement, and stress relief.



HAPPY GUT HEALTHY PREGNANCY HEALTHY BABY

*A gut microbiome nutrition plan for
moms-to-be to support digestion, boost immunity, and
nurture baby's development*

Your gut is the key to your baby's health.

Every meal, every bite of food and every habit during pregnancy influences your baby's development and immune system. Happy Gut, Healthy Pregnancy, Healthy Baby offers a compassionate, science-based guide to nourishing both you and your growing little one through the power of the gut microbiome.

With clear explanations, simple meal plans, and real-world tips, you'll learn how to:

- Ease digestion woes and banish bloating naturally
- Support healthy blood sugar and balanced hormones
- Build a stronger immune system for your baby
- Reduce common pregnancy discomforts with food-first solutions

Written with warmth and encouragement, this book helps expecting moms feel confident, cared for and empowered—one gut-healthy choice at a time.

Because a happy gut means a happier, healthier pregnancy—and baby.