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Biophysical Impact of Non-Nutritive Additives on the Human Gut Microbiome

Biology * Public Health * Evolution

Modern Dietary Matrices and Ancestral Gut Symbionts

The human gastrointestinal tract is a co-evolved ecosystem whose resident microbes regulate host metabolism, mucosal immunity, and pathogen defense.[1] Over the past half-century, global nutrition has shifted toward Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs) -- industrial formulations stripped of intact food matrices and fortified with synthetic emulsifiers, non-nutritive sweeteners (NNS), and preservatives.[1][2] While epidemiological studies link UPF intake to obesity, type 2 diabetes, and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), mechanistic data show that non-nutritive additives directly dismantle the physical and chemical niches required by beneficial genera across the Lactobacillaceae family.[2][3]

Formerly grouped under Lactobacillus (before the 2020 taxonomic reclassification into 25 genera including Lactiplantibacillus, Lacticaseibacillus, and Limosilactobacillus),[3] lactic acid bacteria act as sentinels of the small intestine and colonic mucus niche.[4] They sustain host homeostasis by secreting bacteriocins (such as plantaricin) and organic acids against Salmonella, Escherichia coli, and enteric pathogens;[3][5] supporting epithelial tight-junction integrity and mucin protection;[6][7] and modulating mucosal immune regulation.[3][6]

The Detergent Effect: Dietary Emulsifiers and Mucus Barrier Erosion

Colonic protection relies on a dense inner mucus layer and a looser outer glycoprotein scaffold where commensals anchor via mucus-binding proteins (MucBP), pili, and Surface Layer (S-layer) arrays.[4][8] Synthetic emulsifiers -- notably carboxymethylcellulose (CMC) and polysorbate 80 (P80) -- lower interfacial surface tension, thin the mucus scaffold, upregulate bacterial flagellin expression, and allow motile pathobionts to encroach upon the epithelium.[9][10][11] In human mucosal simulator (M-SHIME) and murine models, P80 and CMC compress microbial diversity and remodel gene expression toward pro-inflammatory phenotypes,[10][11][13] while batch fermentation assays demonstrate that synthetic and natural emulsifiers (including soy lecithin and rhamnolipids) acutely reduce viable fecal bacteria by 87%-91% within 48 hours.[12][32]

| Emulsifier | | Biophysical Mechanism | | Impact on Lactic Acid Bacteria & Mucosal Ecology |

| Carboxymethylcellulose (CMC) | | Mucus thinning; inner-layer erosion. | | Drives bacterial encroachment and compromises colonization resistance.[9][11] |

| Polysorbate 80 (P80) | | Upregulates flagellin; erodes mucosal barrier. | | Alters microbiota composition and promotes chronic low-grade inflammation.[10][11] |

| Glycerol Monolaurate (GML) | | Membrane surfactant toxicity. | | Reshapes

community abundance and metabolic signaling.[12][13] |

| Sodium Stearoyl Lactylate (SSL) | | Membrane and fermentative disruption. | | Alters short-chain fatty acid profiles and suppresses sensitive commensals.[13] |

| Soy Lecithin | | Broad surfactant lysis at elevated doses. | | Reduces viable fecal bacteria in ex vivo batch cultures.[12] |

Chemical Signaling Disruption: Sweeteners and Preservatives

* Sweeteners and Quorum Sensing: Sucralose and saccharin alter Firmicutes/Bacteroidetes balance, perturb glycemic control in randomized human trials, and reshape commensal abundance including Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium.[14][15][16] Disruptions to enzymatic and autoinducer-mediated quorum-sensing networks at regulatory loci such as the pln plantaricin cluster further weaken interspecies bacteriocin defense,[17][18] whereas polyols (xylitol, sorbitol) display milder dose-dependent osmotic and prebiotic responses.[19]

* Preservative Inhibition: Food preservatives exert selective pressures along the gastrointestinal tract: sodium benzoate shifts microbial taxonomic structure and physiological markers in murine models,[20] while dietary sulfites inhibit beneficial gut commensals including Lactobacillus and Streptococcus strains in vitro at food-relevant GRAS concentrations,[22] and enteric bacteria actively reduce luminal nitrate to nitrite and nitric oxide.[21]

Acellular Nutrient Starvation and Glycation Stress

Industrial refining replaces intact plant cell-wall fibers -- Microbiota-Accessible Carbohydrates (MACs) -- with acellular sugars absorbed proximally, starving colonic symbionts.[5][7] Deprived of dietary fiber, mucin-foraging generalists digest host mucus glycans, eroding the protective glycoprotein barrier.[7][25] High-heat food extrusion also generates dietary Advanced Glycation End Products (AGEs) that remodel gut microbiota composition and elevate mucosal oxidative and immune stress.[23][24]

| UPF Matrix Factor | | Luminal Mechanism | | Consequence for Mucosal Niche |

| Fiber Deprivation (Low MACs) | | Carbohydrate starvation; mucin foraging. | | Lower SCFA output and inner mucus scaffold thinning.[5][7] |

| Acellular Carbohydrates | | Rapid proximal small-intestinal absorption. | | Deprives distal fermenters of complex substrates.[5][7] |

| Dietary AGEs | | RAGE signaling and redox stress. | | Shifts microbiome structure and elevates mucosal inflammation.[23][24] |

Clinical Evidence and Systemic Pathophysiology

Although fermented dairy products like yogurt contribute transient foodborne L. delbrueckii to stool profiles in cohorts such as TwinsUK,[25] non-yogurt ultra-processed dietary patterns consistently reshape human gut microbial diversity across clinical and birth-cohort studies,[26][27] and human feeding trials confirm emulsifier-induced mucosal encroachment.[9] Systemically, losing commensal colonization resistance weakens protection against enteric pathogens such as Salmonella,[28][29] non-caloric artificial sweeteners enhance plasmid-mediated

conjugative transfer of antibiotic resistance genes,[30] mucosal barrier breakdown drives lipopolysaccharide (LPS) metabolic endotoxemia,[31] and Western-style diets reduce beneficial mammary Lactobacillus relative to Mediterranean diets in primate models.[33]

Reconstructing the Mucosal Niche

Ultra-processed dietary additives undermine beneficial gut symbionts through surfactant mucus erosion, disruption of microbial metabolites and growth, and acellular fiber starvation.[5][10][14] Preserving colonization resistance and epithelial homeostasis relies on minimizing synthetic emulsifiers and restoring diverse, minimally processed fermentable dietary fibers.[7][29]

Updates... (Nov 19, 2026): Replaced mismatched animal-husbandry, pharmaceutical-formulation, and off-topic food-processing citations with verified primary human gut microbiology, colonization resistance, sodium benzoate, and emulsifier studies; upgraded PubMed/PMC/preprint links to canonical DOIs with full bibliographic attribution; and standardized reference formatting.

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