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By Carl Collen

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Good gut feeling about avos

Plant & Food Research study is the first to examine the direct effect of avocados on gut health



New research conducted by Plant & Food Research scientists in New Zealand has found that avocados may be good for gut health.

The organisation's Dr Gunaranjan Paturi and colleagues Dr Christine Butts and Dr Kerry Bentley-Hewitt decided to see what impact avocados might have on gut health, given the fact that they are already known to support cardiovascular health, blood glucose regulation and have anti-inflammatory effects.

The study, funded as part of MBI's Food for Health programme and published in Plant Foods for Human Nutrition, is the first to examine the direct effect of avocados on gut health.

The study

Macronutrients in food such as dietary fibre are known to alter gut microbiota composition and metabolic activity, so the team fed rats different diets that included 5, 10 or 15 per cent avocado for six weeks.

Paturi said they were surprised to find the avocado had no noticeable effect on bacterial populations in the rats' guts compared with the control – but their study did find other beneficial health effects.

The gut bacteria metabolised the dietary fibre in the avocado to produce short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) as a result of fermentation. SCFAs are associated with a number of health benefits including the stimulation of cells to produce antimicrobial peptides called defensins, which play an important role in immune protection.

The research showed higher concentrations of defensins in the gut tissues of the avocado-fed rats. Paturi said this was not solid proof of beneficial activity in the body itself but higher levels are probably better for gut health.

Another change to the gut lining has more straightforward benefits. SCFAs are also the fuel for goblet cells. Goblet cells produce mucus in a healthy gut that protect gut tissue. The team found significantly more goblet cells in the gut

wall in rats on the 15 per cent avocado diet. Paturi said the finding implied avocado also positively influences gut mucus secretion.

As this trial was working with a known safe and beneficial food, Paturi said the next step could be a move straight into testing with humans.

"This is exciting research," said New Zealand Avocado chief executive Jen Scoular. "It potentially opens the door to a whole new area of benefit we hadn't seen before.

"It would be great to see this research followed up to find out if it translates into real benefits for human gut health," Scoular added.

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