

A Gut Feeling: Could gut health startups hold the miracle cure to our wellbeing?

The old adage goes that ‘you are what you eat’. It’s become a byword for how we’ve become more thoughtful about the food we consume, and the impact this has on us and our surrounding environment.

There’s more to this than just the saying, though: there’s a science to it. Science and research has meant we increasingly understand the fine balance of our bodies, and how each input can impact various other aspects of your body. This is no truer than in the gut.

As research advances around the impact of gut health, so do the opportunities to drive creative solutions to meet consumer demand. As with many of society’s challenges, particularly around personal health and wellbeing, startups and tech entrepreneurs are well-placed to innovate around these solutions.

Behind the science

The gut microbiome—encompassing all bacteria, fungi, and viruses in your gut—has been shown to play a critical role in your overall wellbeing.

Your digestive system, for one, is closely connected to your gut health: an unhealthy gut can contribute greatly to weight gain and obesity. There are also a number of gastrointestinal disorders, like IBS and colitis, that are impacted by the balance of your gut microbiome. The fact that more than 40% of people globally now suffer from these gastrointestinal disorders shows the scale of the problem and the need for effective solutions.

There's also a close link between your skin and your gut—often referred to as the 'gut-skin axis'. Research around this underlines the relationship between your diet (and how it impacts the balance of your gut microbiome) and skin conditions like psoriasis, acne, and dermatitis. The startup Fermento is developing a range of probiotics to target healthy skin and general immunity, tapping into the powerful role that the gut plays in overall wellbeing.

Research into women's health has also benefited from our stronger understanding of gut health. Gas, bloating, and constipation that many women face during menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause are often a result of gut health problems. The startup her1, which raised a €5.5M seed round last July, develops supplements for women that offer gut health support at key stages over their lifetime.

Gut health benefits aren't purely physical: there's also a strong link to mental health. The gut has often been dubbed the 'second brain', on account of its close link to the central nervous system and its impact on mood regulating. It produces many of the same neurotransmitters—like serotonin and dopamine—that the brain does. Startups like Kallyope (which has raised \$243M to date) are developing new medicines that can capitalise on this gut-brain axis.

The opportunity for startups

For startups looking to support and enhance gut health science, the market opportunity is already vast. The maturity of scientific research has accelerated consumer interest in gut health and the overall value of the market. The global digestive health market is expected to reach a value of \$72B by 2027. Technology, as with other areas of healthcare, will play a key role in growing this further: the global telehealth market is predicted to reach \$475B by 2026.

As awareness increases alongside consumer interest, so will the need for development around diagnosis and care solutions. There's a huge opportunity for companies looking to widen access to microbiome diagnosis and hydrogen breath tests, which supports individual understanding of gut health. Care solutions are also a ripe area for development, whether this is through symptom tracking, digital advice, or digital lifestyle support around gut health.

We're already looking for the next leading gut health tech startups in this multi-billion dollar industry. We've just launched *The Future Leaders of Gut Health* initiative, which offers entrepreneurs the chance to pitch for up to \$250K investment in front of a panel of experts and tech investors. Successful founders will also receive mentorship, operational support, and industry networking opportunities from Founders Factory and the Johnson & Johnson family (both JJDC and J&J affiliates).

The scale and scope of the gut health market is an exciting opportunity for two reasons. For one, the value of the market, driven by consumer demand and external investment, looks set to boom in the coming years. But more importantly, gut health startups have the chance to drive innovation in healthcare, and create new vital solutions which could impact millions of lives.

To find out more about Founders Factory gut health initiative, and how to apply, [*here*](#).

Olivia Brooks is the Investment Associate at leading accelerator and venture studio Founders Factory.

Article by OLIVIA BROOKS