

THE AUSTRALIAN

REVIEW

Why it's wise to trust your gut



Jeff Daniels in the famous toilet scene from *Dumb and Dumber*: colorectal surgeon Michael Levitt says constipation affects almost half of the adult female population.

- TINA ALLEN
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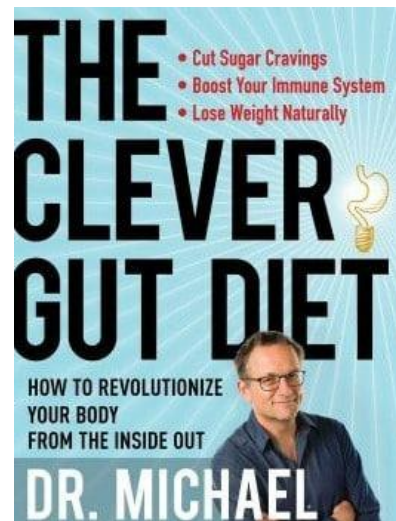
The regularity of our bowels is not generally considered a polite topic of conversation. If discussed at all, defecation is reserved for private whispers and the results flushed furtively away.

It is also striking how little most people know about the digestive process — apart from what goes in and what comes out.

New research into the workings of our gut, and the 50 trillion-plus microbes that reside there, is now making it possible to improve our understanding of our bodies and our health.

In *The Clever Gut Diet*, British author and television presenter Michael Mosley admits to being “obsessed by guts in general and the microbiome in particular”.

According to Mosley, the thousand or so species of bacteria and other microbes comprising the microbiome are “the star of the digestive system” and display a richer diversity than any rainforest.



He refers to some of these bacterial species as our “Old Friends” because they have evolved with human beings across millions of years. However, they can be ravaged by eating junk food and the use of antibiotics.

Anyone fortunate enough to hear Mosley speak during his recent Australian book tour will know he has a knack for presenting medical information in an engaging and easy-to-understand way.

Readers also get to know Mosley, who weaves details of his life and experiences throughout this book. He often mentions his wife, Clare Bailey, a general practitioner, who has been tolerant of the many experiments Mosley has inflicted on himself since they met in medical school.

He says that in a moment of “exuberance”, he agreed to take part in a live audience event at the Science Museum in London, where he swallowed a pill-shaped camera linked to a huge screen.

Mosley uses rich imagery to describe the way food is digested by each of the organs the pill cam encountered on its 24-hour journey through his body to the toilet bowl.

These include the small bowel, which is covered in millions of tiny projections for absorbing nutrients, called villi, which reminded Mosley of “the last time he went snorkelling in a bay full of seaweed”. The next stop

was the wide, open spaces of his large bowel, home of the legendary microbiome.

Mosley is convinced that many common gut conditions are better treated by a change of diet, rather than taking drugs. His book will be of interest to anyone wanting to optimise their diet for gut health.

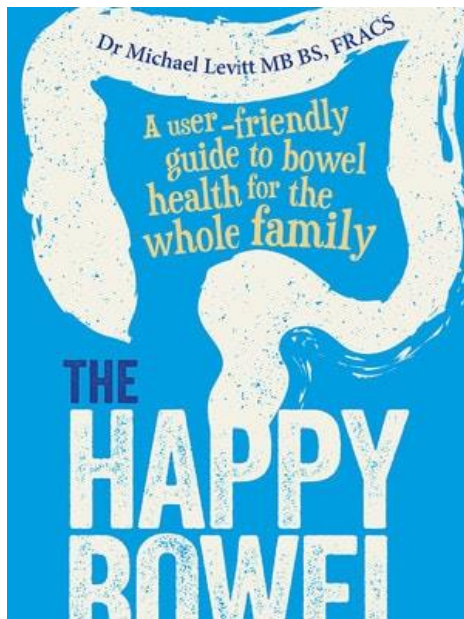
He advocates being adventurous in food choices and including fermented foods such as yoghurt, feta cheese, red wine, apple cider vinegar, sauerkraut and a Korean dish called kimchi. He views each food decision he makes as a “responsibility” because he knows the benefits of having a healthy, happy gut range from being regular to improving his mood and sleep.

In addition to the good bacteria that keep your gut healthy, Mosley says there are “plenty of bad guys on the prowl”.

Problems arise when the bad bacteria that thrive on sweet and/or processed food start to dominate the good bacteria — including the Old Friends — and become more influential in generating cravings.

His BBC documentaries and previous three books have made Mosley a household name in Britain and this latest volume is earning him the title of “world’s top gut health guru”.

Likewise, respected Perth colorectal surgeon Michael Levitt is regarded as a leading authority on bowel disorders. His third book, *The Happy Bowel*, which aims to foster good bowel habits, will be welcomed by general practitioners, hospital and aged-care workers, and patients alike.



Levitt has devoted his career to “trying to improve the bowel habits of individuals puzzled and bedevilled by the malfunction and outright failure of their bowels”.

After speaking to thousands of individuals, he has been able to identify many of the factors that contribute to the common disorders he sees in his practice, including urgency and faecal soiling, constipation and bloating, as well as haemorrhoids and pelvic floor pain.

If any of these bowel problems sound like you, the good news is that they can usually be overcome by modifying your toileting behaviour.

A routine question Levitt asks his patients is: “When you go to the bathroom to open your bowel, is it in response to an irresistible urge to go at that instant?” If your answer is yes, you are following Levitt’s first golden rule of healthy rectal evacuation.

Many of us empty our bladders to avoid the inconvenience of having to interrupt an upcoming activity or journey. However, Levitt says “speculative” attempts to open the bowel are dangerous because they are likely to result in straining, pelvic floor discomfort and even haemorrhoids.

In addition to using sayings such as “urge is king” and “an empty bowel is a happy bowel”, Levitt hits the nail on the head over and over to reinforce the importance of correct toileting habits to a lay readership.

This slightly annoying use of repetition would not be a problem for anyone wanting to dip into the relevant parts of the book for their own bowel problem.

Levitt offers suggestions of the best foods and medications for people finding it difficult to achieve the third of his golden rules: a solid stool. He also offers advice for readers suffering from constipation, which “affects to some degree almost half of the adult female population of the planet”.

A fascinating section of the book is entitled Mars and Venus in the Bathroom, which illuminates the different bowel habits of the sexes: “men tending to be ‘fast and fruity’ and women to be ‘slow and sluggish’.”

This pocket-sized gem of a book is an investment for anyone struggling to achieve perfect bowel movements on a consistent basis, if ever.

Readers will thank Levitt and breathe a sigh of relief when they experience, perhaps for the first time, “a completely effortless, entirely satisfying and perfectly formed bowel action”.

The second of his three golden rules, and the one I have left for last, is: “Never, ever, take any distracting influences — newspapers, books, magazines, mobile devices — with you to the bathroom.”

This rule wouldn’t go down well with a good proportion of the adult male population of the planet, including bestselling Dutch writer and biologist Midas Dekkers.

In his latest offering, *The Story of Shit*, Dekkers recounts how as a child he was astonished to see people reading in libraries when they “could do it at home alone in the loo”.

For Dekkers, defecation is “one of life’s most elementary pleasures” so it is appropriate that the title of his book in The Netherlands is: *De kleine verlossing of de lust van ontlasten* (The little relief from the pleasure of shitting).

Dekkers finds it remarkable that shit receives so little attention in serious books, compared with sex and food. His 293-page ode to shit makes a compelling case for bringing it out of the shadows because of its importance and economic value.

“What we call the environment is nothing but the excretions of plants and animals. Mother Nature is hopelessly incontinent. Yet nature rarely



stinks.” In a chapter entitled Brown Gold, he discusses the relative merits of various manures, from humble stable manure to guano bird poo from Peru to the “shit of all shits”: ambergris (grey amber) from a constipated sperm whale. Prized by the perfume industry, lumps of ambergris washed up on a beach sell for upwards of \$25,000 a kilogram.

He provides as an example of a “turd as a memento”, the little sacks of koala manure sold in the NSW town of Gunnedah.

Perhaps Dekkers’s ultimate proof of the importance of shit is the way parents and pet owners demonstrate how much they love their “little poopers” by cleaning up after them. “Men who have never seen their own wives defecating are willing to stand in rain and wind ... (and) pick up (their dog’s) warm and steaming excrement in a plastic bag.”

Dekkers is a reservoir of knowledge (and shit). Fans of his humorous, distinctly European and meandering style of prose will enjoy *The Story of Shit*, which includes a collection of delightful black-and-white illustrations.

He completes his romp through science, art, gastronomy and social history with a chapter about sex entitled Fun and Games. Here he mentions bizarre fetishes involving shit as an aphrodisiac. He quotes from literary figures such as Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who once wrote: “But love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement.”

Dekkers jubilantly declares: “(Shit) is filthy, but — like sex — it can also be glorious.”

Shit contains millions of the same microbes that reside in our large bowel. Only recently have scientists been able to analyse the personal mix of bacteria in a person’s faeces by sequencing fragments of their microbe’s DNA.

We already donate blood, semen and bone marrow. Now it is possible to donate healthy faeces to a person whose gut has become overgrown with “bad” bacteria, such as *Clostridium difficile*. Mosley, Levitt and Dekkers all mention this procedure, called a faecal microbial transplant, which has been used successfully to treat a range of gut and other disorders.

Although irksome, poo has life-giving properties and is worthy of discussion. Likewise, farts can be embarrassing, but they are a sign of life from the bacteria in our gut.

Mosley says: “It feels like we have come across this brand-new land, populated by strange and exotic creatures, which are only now beginning to reveal their secrets.”

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her debut book is *Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon*.

The Clever Gut Diet: How to Revolutionise Your Body from the Inside Out

By Dr Michael Mosley

Simon & Schuster, 276pp, \$29.99

The Happy Bowel: A User-friendly Guide to Bowel Health for the Whole Family

By Dr Michael Levitt

Fremantle Press, 192pp, \$24.99

The Story of Shit

By Midas Dekkers

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

Text Publishing, 293pp, \$32.99