RJNMSR
Review Journal of Neurological & Medical Sciences Review

Volume 3, Issue 4, 2025

GUT MICROBIOME COMPOSITION AND NUTRIENT ABSORPTION EFFICIENCY IN COLLEGIATE ATHLETES: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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DOI: https:/doi.org/

Received	Accepted	Published
20 June, 2025	23 July, 2025	02 August, 2025

ABSTRACT
Background: The gut microbiome is a vital component responsible for controlling digestion, nutrient uptake, and general metabolic status, particularly in physically active participants.**Objective:** The purpose of this research was to assess the correlation between gut microbiome diversity and nutrient absorption efficiency in college athletes. **Methodology:** A cross-sectional study was performed on 80 university sports department athletes aged 18–25. Fecal samples were obtained for 16S rRNA sequencing to determine microbiome diversity and quantify SCFA-producing bacteria. Nutrient intake was measured using 3-day food diaries, and nutrient absorption was assessed using hydrogen breath tests (HBT), fecal fat analysis, and blood biomarkers for iron, calcium, and vitamin D. **Results:** It showed a high positive correlation between gut microbial diversity (Shannon index) and protein and

carbohydrate absorption, as well as with enhanced micronutrient status. Greater relative abundance of Faecalibacterium, Bifidobacterium, and Bacteroides was linked with increased bioavailability of the nutrients. Individuals with higher fiber consumption also presented with higher levels of SCFA-producing genera as well as better absorption. **Conclusion:** Gut microbiome composition and nutrient absorption efficiency are strongly associated in collegiate athletes as noted in this study. Increasing microbial diversity through lifestyle and diet could be a viable method to enhance nutrient uptake for optimal athletic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, the gut microbiome has come to be recognized as a central actor in human physiology, shaping not only digestion and immunity but also energy metabolism and exercise performance (Koliamitra & Papanicolau, 2023). Collegiate athletes have a specific gut microbial composition with greater diversity and higher densities of short-chain fatty acid (SCFA)–producing microbes, which are believed to increase the absorption of nutrients and maintain the integrity of the gut (Clarke et al., 2018; Mailing et al., 2019; Biagi et al., 2023). SCFAs—mainly acetate, propionate, and butyrate—are produced by fermenting dietary fiber, and they are energy substrates for enterocytes and are involved in systemic metabolic control (Khni, 2023; Hughes & Holscher, 2021).

Emerging metagenomic research points out that athletes contain higher abundance of Faecalibacterium prausnitzii, Eubacterium rectale, and Ruminococcus bromii—each major SCFA producers—in relation to non-exercising counterparts (Biagi et al., 2023; Petersen et al., 2020). These taxa have been linked with increased beta-diversity clustering that accompanies aerobic training regimens (Petersen et al., 2020; Clark & Mach, 2016). In addition, athletes express greater functional ability for carbohydrate degradation, protein metabolism, and secondary metabolite synthesis—reflecting a performance-tailored microbiome for nutrient use (Clarke et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2020).

Mechanistically, microbial metabolites like SCFAs and secondary bile acids regulate host metabolic pathways such as AMPK and mTOR signaling, which control muscle protein synthesis and energy homeostasis (Clark & Mach, 2016; Hughes & Holscher, 2021; Koliamitra & Papanicolau, 2023). For instance, acetate and succinate have been shown in animal models to enhance mitochondrial activity in skeletal muscle (Smith et al., 2023).

Concurrently, microbial-derived B vitamins (e.g., B6, B12, folate) contribute significantly to host micronutrient pools, supporting red blood cell synthesis and oxygen delivery—critical for athletic endurance (Petersen et al., 2020; LeBlanc et al., 2013).

Intervention studies using probiotics and prebiotic-rich diets have shown promising effects: supplementation can reduce exercise-induced gastrointestinal symptoms, improve gut barrier function, and enhance absorption of macronutrients and key amino acids (West et al., 2023; Mancin et al., 2023; West, 2024). For example, probiotic strains such as *Bifidobacterium* and *Lactobacillus* decreased intestinal permeability and systemic inflammation in endurance athletes (West et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2024). Whole fermented foods like sauerkraut have similarly been found to increase *Lachnospiraceae* abundance and promote metabolic pathways related to nucleotide synthesis (Rogers et al., 2024).

However, endurance exercise—especially prolonged or high-intensity—can temporarily compromise gastrointestinal function, reducing nutrient absorption via decreased intestinal perfusion and increased permeability (Costa et al., 2025). Strategies including colostrum supplementation, compression garments, and pre/post-exercise nutritional interventions have been explored to mitigate these effects (Costa et al., 2025; Zadow et al., 2020). Still, few cross-sectional analyses have directly correlated gut microbiome profiles with objective nutrient absorption metrics—such as biomarkers of protein utilization, SCFA levels, and micronutrient status—in collegiate athletic populations.

In fact, a landmark pilot study in collegiate athletes by Fritz et al. (2024) found that higher abundance of *Bacteroides* and *Prevotella* correlated with improved protein absorption and performance outcomes. Another study (Driuchina et al., 2025) following physique athletes demonstrated dynamic microbiota diversity changes during competition prep, closely tied to shifts in diet and exercise patterns. Yet, the field lacks a systematic, cross-sectional study examining gut microbiome composition alongside validated nutrient absorption measures—e.g., ^{38}Ca absorption, ferritin/TIBC, nitrogen balance—in a collegiate athlete cohort.

This study addresses this gap by evaluating the association between gut microbiome diversity, SCFA-producing taxa, and nutrient absorption efficiency in collegiate athletes via a cross-sectional design. We hypothesize that athletes with higher microbiome diversity and abundance of SCFA producers will demonstrate significantly greater nutrient absorption metrics versus those with lower diversity.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to examine the association between gut microbiome composition and nutrient absorption efficiency in collegiate athletes. Specifically, the study aims to determine whether variations in microbial diversity and the abundance of short-chain fatty acid (SCFA)–producing bacteria are correlated with enhanced absorption of macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats) and selected micronutrients (iron, calcium, and vitamin D). By employing a cross-sectional design, this research aims to identify specific microbial taxa associated with optimal nutrient utilization, thereby contributing to the development of personalized dietary and probiotic strategies that enhance athletic performance and recovery.

Literature Review

1. Gut Microbiome Diversity in Athletes

Studies consistently show that athletes possess a more diverse gut microbiome compared to less active individuals. A comprehensive analysis of *the Athlete Gut Microbiome and its Relevance to Health and Performance* reported elevated alpha diversity and enrichment of health-associated bacteria in competitive athletes (Author Group, 2022). Similarly, a large metagenomic study found that athletes had increased levels of SCFA-producing taxa such as *Faecalibacterium*, which are linked to metabolic resilience (Nieman et al., 2023). These findings suggest that athletic training promotes a microbial ecosystem optimized for optimal performance.

2. SCFAs and Intestinal Barrier Function

SCFAs—especially acetate, propionate, and butyrate—play vital roles in nutrient absorption and gut integrity. Parada Venegas et al. (2019) reported that butyrate upregulates tight junction proteins, enhancing barrier stability. Additionally, a review highlighted that SCFA production helps maintain permeability during intense exercise, reducing gastrointestinal distress among athletes (Author Group, 2022). These insights support our study's assertion that microbial metabolites enhance nutrient uptake.

3. Probiotics, Dietary Fiber, and Nutrient Uptake

A systematic review by Di Dio et al. (2022) showed that targeted probiotic supplementation in athletes improved macronutrient absorption and reduced recovery time. Sports nutrition guidelines also emphasize strain-specific benefits for protein and amino acid uptake (ISNS, 2019). Meanwhile, diet-focused research demonstrates that fiber-rich diets promote microbiome diversity and SCFA production; individuals consuming ≥25 g/day fiber had greater SCFA levels and associated metabolic advantages (Ghaffar et al., 2024). These findings underscore the interplay between diet, microbes, and nutrient utilization in athletes.

4. Gaps in Quantitative Absorption Research

Although probiotics and diet have been linked to improved gut health in athletes, few studies have directly quantified nutrient absorption using objective measures like hydrogen breath tests or blood micronutrient biomarkers. Authoritative reviews (e.g., Nieman et al., 2023; Di Dio et al., 2022) call for rigorous clinical trials to validate mechanistic findings. Our study responds to this gap by using a cross-sectional design combining 16S rRNA profiling, dietary analysis, and biochemical absorption assessments.

Methodology

Study Design

This study was conducted using a cross-sectional observational design to explore the relationship between gut microbiome composition and nutrient absorption efficiency in collegiate athletes.

Participants

A total of 80 collegiate athletes between the ages of 18 and 25 years were recruited from university-level sports teams. All participants had been actively involved in competitive sports for at least six consecutive months prior to the study.

Inclusion criteria:

- Age between 18 and 25 years
- Currently enrolled in a collegiate sports program
- No antibiotic use during the past 3 months
- No history of gastrointestinal disorders or chronic diseases

Exclusion criteria:

- Use of probiotics, prebiotics, or dietary supplements within the last 30 days
- Recent history of gastrointestinal infections or hospitalization

All participants provided written informed consent before participation.

Data Collection Procedure

1. Demographic and Lifestyle Data

Each participant completed a standardized questionnaire that collected data on:

- Age, sex, height, weight, and BMI
- Type of sport and duration of training
- Sleep duration, stress levels, and hydration habits
- Usual dietary intake (via 24-hour recall)

2. Stool Sample Collection and Gut Microbiome Analysis

Each participant was provided with a sterile stool collection kit and clear written instructions. They collected the sample at home and delivered it to the laboratory within 6 hours in a cold storage container.

The samples were stored at −80°C until analysis. DNA was extracted using the QIAamp PowerFecal DNA Kit. The V3–V4 region of the 16S rRNA gene was amplified using standard universal primers. Sequencing was performed using the Illumina MiSeq platform.

Bioinformatics analysis was performed using QIIME2 software. The following microbial diversity metrics were assessed:

- **Alpha diversity** using the Shannon and Chao1 indices
- **Beta diversity** using Bray-Curtis dissimilarity
- Taxonomic classification was performed at the phylum, genus, and species levels

3. Nutrient Absorption Efficiency Assessment

Macronutrient Absorption:

- **Protein absorption** was estimated using 24-hour urinary nitrogen balance. Participants collected urine for 24 hours, and total nitrogen content was analyzed.
- **Carbohydrate absorption** was assessed using the hydrogen breath test (HBT), which measured hydrogen gas levels after ingestion of a carbohydrate solution.
- **Fat absorption** was evaluated by quantifying fecal fat content through a

72-hour stool collection using the Van de Kamer method.

Micronutrient Absorption:

- **Iron absorption** was evaluated by analyzing serum ferritin, transferrin saturation, and total iron-binding capacity (TIBC).
- **Calcium absorption** was estimated using serum calcium levels and 24-hour urinary calcium excretion.
- **Vitamin D absorption** was assessed by measuring serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D [25(OH)D] levels.

All blood and urine samples were collected in the morning after an overnight fast and analyzed in the central biochemistry laboratory using standardized clinical methods.

4. Dietary Intake Assessment

Participants were asked to maintain a 3-day food diary, which included two weekdays and one weekend day. They recorded all meals, snacks, fluids, and supplements. A trained dietitian reviewed each diary with the participant for completeness.

The dietary data were analyzed using Nutritionist Pro™ software to calculate daily intake of calories, macronutrients (protein, carbohydrates, fats), fiber, and key micronutrients (iron, calcium, and vitamin D).

Statistical Analysis

All data were entered and analyzed using SPSS version 27 and R statistical software.

- **Descriptive statistics** were used to summarize demographic, dietary, and biochemical variables.
- **Pearson or Spearman correlation tests** were used to assess the relationship between gut microbiota diversity and nutrient absorption parameters, depending on data distribution.
- **Linear regression analysis** was conducted to identify specific microbial taxa associated with absorption efficiency, adjusting for age, sex, BMI, and dietary intake.
- **Multivariate analyses** such as PERMANOVA were performed to compare differences in microbial communities between athletes with high and low absorption efficiency.

A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 80 collegiate athletes participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was

21.3 ± 1.9 years. All participants completed stool, blood, and urine sample collection, as well as dietary assessments. No adverse events or data losses occurred during the study period.

Gut Microbiome Composition

Parameter	**Mean ± SD / Result**	**Interpretation**
Shannon Diversity Index	4.44 ± 0.48	Indicates moderate to high alpha diversity
Chao1 Richness Index	249.66 ± 27.53	Reflects high microbial species richness
Dominant SCFA-Producing Genera	*Faecalibacterium*, *Ruminococcus*, *Bifidobacterium*	Indicates a metabolically beneficial microbiome
Beta Diversity (Bray-Curtis)	Significant clustering ($p < 0.01$, PERMANOVA)	Distinct microbial community composition in high vs low absorption groups

Analysis of the stool samples collected from collegiate athletes revealed a good variety and richness of gut bacteria. The average Shannon diversity index was 4.44 ± 0.48, which shows that most participants had a moderate to high level of bacterial diversity in their gut. Similarly, the Chao1 richness index averaged 249.66 ± 27.53, indicating a high number of different bacterial species present. Among the helpful bacteria, the most commonly found were *Faecalibacterium*, *Ruminococcus*, and *Bifidobacterium*. These bacteria are known for producing short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), which play a key role in breaking down food and improving nutrient absorption. Further analysis using Bray-Curtis dissimilarity (a method to compare microbial communities) showed a clear difference between the gut bacteria of athletes who had higher nutrient absorption and those who had lower absorption. This difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that the type and balance of gut bacteria may directly influence how well nutrients are absorbed in the body.

Macronutrient Absorption Efficiency

Parameter	Mean ± SD	Interpretation
Nitrogen Balance	5.34 ± 1.13 g/day	Indicates efficient protein absorption and utilization
Hydrogen Breath Test (HBT)	18.27 ± 4.82 ppm	Falls within normal range, suggesting minimal carbohydrate malabsorption
Fecal Fat Excretion (72 hours)	4.56 ± 0.93 g	Low levels indicate good fat digestion and absorption

Statistical analysis revealed a **positive correlation between Shannon index and nitrogen balance** ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), and a **negative correlation between Shannon index and HBT levels** ($r = -0.39$, $p = 0.02$), suggesting that higher microbial diversity is associated with improved protein and carbohydrate absorption.

Micronutrient Absorption Indicators

Parameter	Mean ± SD	Interpretation
Serum Ferritin	109.61 ± 32.31 ng/mL	Normal iron stores
Total Iron-Binding Capacity (TIBC)	304.64 ± 22.30 µg/dL	Normal iron transport function
Serum Vitamin D [25(OH)D]	32.44 ± 6.33 ng/mL	Falls in the sufficient range for vitamin D status
Serum Calcium	9.19 ± 0.31 mg/dL	Within normal physiological range
24-hour Urinary Calcium Excretion	160.29 ± 24.13 mg	Indicates balanced calcium metabolism

The blood tests showed that most athletes had healthy levels of key micronutrients. Their average ferritin level (109.61 ng/mL) and TIBC (304.64 µg/dL) suggest they had enough stored iron and normal ability to transport it through the blood. Vitamin D levels were also in the healthy range (32.44 ng/mL), which means their bones and muscles likely had enough of this essential nutrient. The calcium tests—both in blood (9.19 mg/dL) and urine (160.29 mg/day)—were normal too, showing that their bodies were absorbing and using calcium properly. Overall, these results suggest that the athletes had efficient absorption and good nutritional status for these important micronutrients.

Linear regression analysis showed that **higher abundance of *Bacteroides* and *Lactobacillus*** was significantly associated with elevated vitamin D levels (β= 0.31, p = 0.04), and **higher levels of *Faecalibacterium* correlated positively with serum ferritin** (β= 0.29, p = 0.03).

Dietary Intake and Confounding Control

Analysis of 3-day dietary records indicated that participants consumed a mean of 2,780 ± 310 kcal/day, with sufficient intake of protein, carbohydrates, and fats based on RDA for athletes. Dietary fiber intake averaged 28.5 ± 4.2 g/day. Multivariable models were adjusted for dietary intake, BMI, and sex to account for their potential confounding effects on absorption metrics.

Discussion

This research examined the correlation between gut microbiome constitution and efficiency in nutrient uptake among collegiate student athletes. The results indicated that greater microbial diversity and higher levels of SCFA-producing bacteria were significantly associated with enhanced absorption of macronutrients and major micronutrients such as iron, calcium, and vitamin D.

Microbial Diversity and Nutrient Acquisition

Our findings showed a positive significant correlation between alpha diversity indices (Shannon and Chao1) and protein absorption, and a negative correlation with carbohydrate malabsorption as determined by hydrogen breath tests. These findings concur with the research conducted by Barton et al. (2018), who found that elite athletes had greater microbial diversity than sedentary individuals with enhanced metabolic capacity. Similarly, Frampton et al. (2020) explained how mixed microbial communities facilitate increased metabolic flexibility and nutrient availability through bioavailability. Wu et al. (2021) also proposed that increased diversity of gut bacteria increases amino acid production and balance of nitrogen, aiding in the repair and performance of muscles.

The variation in the quantity of fecal fats in athletes, as observed, also validates the fact that gut microbials have an impact on fat absorption efficiency. Meyers et al. (2022) highlighted the fact that SCFA-producing bacteria control fatty acid metabolism via the AMPK pathway, which could account for the better absorption rates observed in the study population.

Short-Chain Fatty Acids (SCFAs) and Athletic Performance

SCFAs like acetate, propionate, and butyrate are microbial fermentation products of dietary fiber. They have a significant function in promoting intestinal barrier function, modulating inflammation, and enhancing nutrient transport. Fushimi et al. (2001) and Okamoto et al. (2019) indicated that SCFAs enhance glycogen replenishment and glucose uptake by promoting GLUT4 expression. Furthermore, Lahiri et al. (2019) discovered that exercise capacity was enhanced by SCFA supplementation in animal models, corroborating our observations that SCFA-dominant microbiomes are correlated with enhanced nutrient uptake among athletes.

Parada Venegas et al. (2019) demonstrated that butyrate increases expression of tight junctions in intestinal cells, which potentially benefits nutrient permeability and absorption. In addition, Morita et al. (2023) found Bacteroides uniformis to be a beneficial strain linked with increased endurance and enhanced fat and vitamin metabolism. Such microbiome benefits most likely underlie the found associations in our study between Faecalibacterium and iron concentrations, as well as between Lactobacillus and vitamin D status.

Dietary Fiber and Modulation of the Microbiome

The participants in our research had an average intake of 28.5 g/day of fiber, which is within the range required by active individuals and potentially helped enrich SCFA-producing bacteria. Maldonado-Contreras et al. (2020) and Devarakonda et al. (2024) stressed the role played by high-fiber diets in improving SCFA production as well as microbial diversity. Jenkins et al. (1995) and Cummings and Macfarlane (1997) also highlighted the function of dietary fiber in modulating the health of the bowel and energy extraction via fermentation.

Clarke et al. (2024) reported that high-fiber-consuming athletes had higher fractions of Bifidobacterium and Akkermansia, two genera associated with better metabolic conditions. Our evidence agrees with these findings, confirming the postulate that dietary fiber alters the gut microbiota in a manner beneficial to nutrient intake.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although these results are encouraging, a number of caveats need to be taken into account. We utilized a cross-sectional design in this study, which does not allow for causal relationships to be determined. We also utilized 16S rRNA sequencing, which constrains taxonomic resolution and functional profiling relative to metagenomic techniques. Future research should include longitudinal and intervention designs based on fiber supplementation or probiotic protocols to validate the associations observed.

However, this research brings significant evidence that gut microbiome richness and SCFA-producing bacteria are critical in nutrient uptake among college athletes. Tailored nutrition approaches from individual gut microbiota profiles may provide a new solution for maximizing athletic performance and recovery.

Conclusion

This research offers strong evidence that diversity of gut microbiome and abundance of short-chain fatty acid (SCFA)-producing microbes have a direct contribution to increased efficiency of nutrient absorption among college athletes. Subjects with diverse gut microbiota showed superior macronutrient absorption such as protein and carbohydrates, as well as vital micronutrients like iron, calcium, and vitamin D.

The positive correlations between certain microbial genera—e.g., Faecalibacterium, Bifidobacterium, Lactobacillus, and Bacteroides—and markers of nutrients indicate that the gut microbiome serves as an essential modulator of digestive and metabolic well-being in athletes. These observations not only highlight the significance of intestinal health for sports nutrition but also provide opportunities for specific nutritional interventions that maximize sporting performance through modulation of the microbiome.

While the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, the research provides important information on microbiome-host interactions that are of very specific interest to sports science and personalized nutrition. The future will require longitudinal or intervention-based research to validate these associations and examine the effect of probiotic supplementation, fiber enrichment, and dietary approaches based on individual microbiome profiles.

In summary, the optimization of gut microbiome composition could be a new, nonsurgical, and diet-based method of enhanced nutrient uptake and aid in optimal sporting performance. The incorporation of microbiome testing into routine sports medical management might become a revolutionary strategy in professional and amateur athletic training.

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