

Process-based modelling of microbial community dynamics in the human colon

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July 4, 2022

Abstract

The human colon contains a dynamic microbial community whose composition has important implications for human health. In this work we build a process-based model of the colonic microbial ecosystem and compare with general empirical observations and the results of in-vivo experiments. Our model comprises a complex microbial ecosystem along with absorption of short chain fatty acids (SCFA) and water by the host through the gut wall, variations in incoming dietary substrates (in the form of “meals” whose composition varies in time), bowel movements, feedback on microbial growth from changes in pH resulting from SCFA production, and multiple compartments to represent the proximal, transverse and distal colon. We verify our model against a number of observed criteria, e.g. total SCFA concentrations, SCFA ratios, mass of bowel movements, pH and water absorption over the transit time; and then run simulations investigating the effect of colonic transit time, and the composition and amount of indigestible carbohydrate in the host diet, which we compare with in-vivo studies. The code is available as an R package (`microPopGut`) to aid future research.

Author Summary

Kettle wrote the model code and led the writing of the manuscript. Flint contributed to writing the manuscript. Flint and Louis contributed to all aspects of microbiology and all authors contributed critically to the drafts and gave final approval for publication.

Introduction

The human colon harbours a dense and diverse community of microbiota whose interactions with the host can have a profound effect on human health (e.g.

27 Ros-Covin et al. (2016), Morrison and Preston (2016)). Due to the location of
28 this community within its host, data collection and experimentation are prob-
29 lematic. Information on this system must come from volunteer experiments in
30 which diet and stool samples are monitored or from laboratory experiments us-
31 ing the microbes found in stool samples. Another approach is to put current
32 knowledge into a mathematical framework and run simulations of the system to
33 test our understanding and identify knowledge gaps. To this end a number of
34 mathematical models of this system have been developed - e.g. Cremer et al.
35 (2016), Cremer et al. (2017), Munoz-Tamayo et al. (2010), Smith et al. (2021),
36 Moorthy et al. (2015).

37 When developing a model, a number of assumptions about the system are
38 made in order to reduce complexity/dimensionality so that the model is easier to
39 parameterise, run and analyse. Some modellers choose to reduce the microbial
40 complexity and focus on the physics of the gut (e.g. Cremer et al. (2016),
41 Cremer et al. (2017)), some try to achieve a balance of both (e.g. Munoz-Tamayo
42 et al. (2010)) and some choose to develop the microbial community (e.g. Smith
43 et al. (2021)). The model described here focuses on the microbial community
44 dynamics and on interactions with the host, with a fairly simple model of the
45 colon. We include the simulation of ‘meals’ (of random composition and size)
46 arriving at the colon and look at the effects of bowel movements, both of which,
47 as far as we are aware, have not been previously incorporated into such models.
48 Having developed a complex model of human gut microbiota in a fermentor
49 system (Kettle et al., 2015), and publicly available software (microPop - an
50 R package for modelling microbial communities (Kettle et al., 2018)) we now
51 incorporate this 10-group microbial ecosystem model (Table 1) into a model of
52 the human gut in order to simulate the effects of diet and host on the microbial
53 composition and subsequent short chain fatty acid (SCFA) production.

54 Approximately 95% of the SCFA produced by the microbes during growth
55 are absorbed by the host through the gut wall and it is the ratio of the 3 main
56 SCFAs (acetate, butyrate and propionate) which is known to have a significant
57 effect on human health. Thus, we prioritise information on the values of these
58 ratios in our model verification. Similarly approximately 90% of the water
59 flowing into the colon is absorbed. Changes in the volume of water have a
60 significant effect on the concentration of the molecules in the colon which in
61 turn affects pH which then affects microbial growth, all of which are included
62 in our model.

63 Due to its shape within the body, the colon is commonly divided into 3
64 different regions - the proximal, transverse and distal sections running from
65 beginning to end (Fig. 1A and B). The availability of substrate, microbial
66 growth and hence pH vary along the colon, therefore, although our model is not
67 spatial we simulate these three regions explicitly, with flow from one to another.
68 Furthermore, as well as incorporating varying substrate inflow in the form of
69 meals we also add in the release of mucins along the length of the colon which
70 can be microbially broken down to release proteins and carbohydrates, allowing
71 for further microbial growth away from the beginning of the colon where the
72 substrates enter. A graphical summary of the model is shown in Fig. 2.

73 We use the following criteria to verify our model captures the main features
74 established for the system:

- 75 1. Total SCFA (TSCFA) concentration in the proximal, transverse and distal

76 compartments should be around 123, 117 and 80 mM respectively according
77 to sudden death human autopsies (Cummings et al., 1987)

78 2. Acetate:Propionate:Butyrate ratios are similar (around 3:1:1) in all regions
79 of the colon and around 60:20:20 mM (Cummings et al., 1987)

80 3. Over 95% of SCFA are absorbed by the host (Topping and Clifton, 2001)

81 4. Approx. 90% of incoming water is absorbed by the host (Phillips and
82 Giller, 1973)

83 5. pH in the proximal, transverse and distal compartments should be around
84 5.7, 6.2 and 6.6 respectively (Cummings et al., 1987)

85 6. Normal daily fecal output in Britain is $100\text{-}200 \text{ g d}^{-1}$ of which 25-50 g is
86 solid matter (i.e. $50\text{-}175 \text{ g d}^{-1}$ is water). Bacteria make up about 55%
87 of the solid matter i.e. $14\text{-}28 \text{ g d}^{-1}$ of microbes emitted (Stephen and
88 Cummings, 1980).

89 7. TSCFA concentration decreases with transit time (Lewis and Heaton,
90 1997)

91 After model verification we examine the effects of including meals, bowel move-
92 ments and fixed/varying pH into the model. We then use the model to look at
93 how carbohydrate composition (based on the fractions of resistant starch (RS)
94 and non-starch polysaccharides (NSP)) and total carbohydrate affect the mi-
95 crobial community and SCFA composition. The simulations are then compared
96 with in-vivo data from human volunteer experiments.

97 Although gut microbiota are highly complex and not fully understood, here
98 we show that it is nonetheless possible to develop predictive models of key
99 components of this ecological system. Our results show promise and we believe
100 this model represents a significant step forward in this field. We refer to the
101 model as “microPopGut” and to aid future research the code is available as
102 an R-package on github (<https://github.com/HelenKettle/microPopGut>) and
103 instructions on how to use the package are given in the supplementary file
104 ‘gettingStartedWithMicroPopGut.pdf’.

105 Results

106 Standard Model

107 Having established the default model settings and parameter values which give
108 the best fit to our criteria (see Table 3 for colon parameters and Supp. Info.
109 (section 3) for microbial group parameters) we then investigate the effects of
110 different model configurations, e.g. with/without bowel movements, meals and
111 variable pH, for a range of transit times. Simulations with meals have a random
112 component therefore the model is run for a number of different starting seed
113 values. Due to the random fluctuations these simulations will not reach steady
114 state therefore the summary values are taken as the mean from day 7 (to remove
115 the effect of the initial conditions) to the end of the simulation (28 days) and
116 are averaged over multiple seeds.

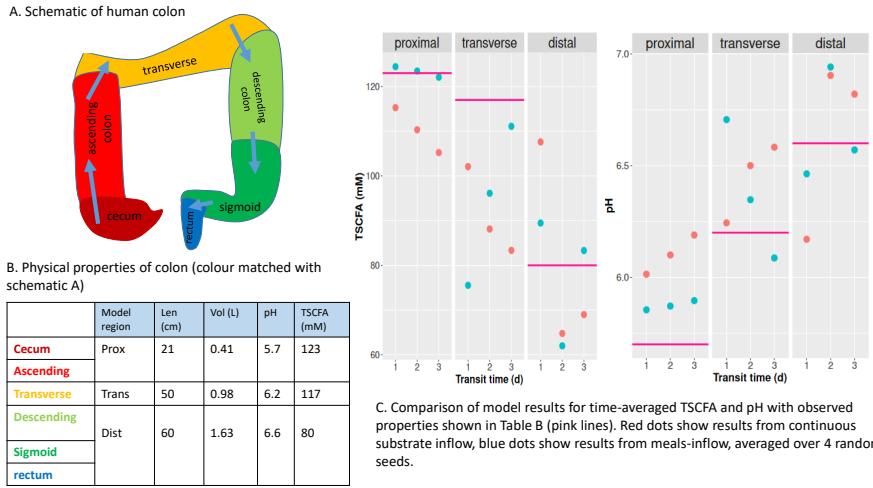


Figure 1: Colon schematic plus table of typical values for physical properties (length, volume, pH and TSCFA) and plots of summarised model simulations for average TSCFA and pH for comparison with typical values.

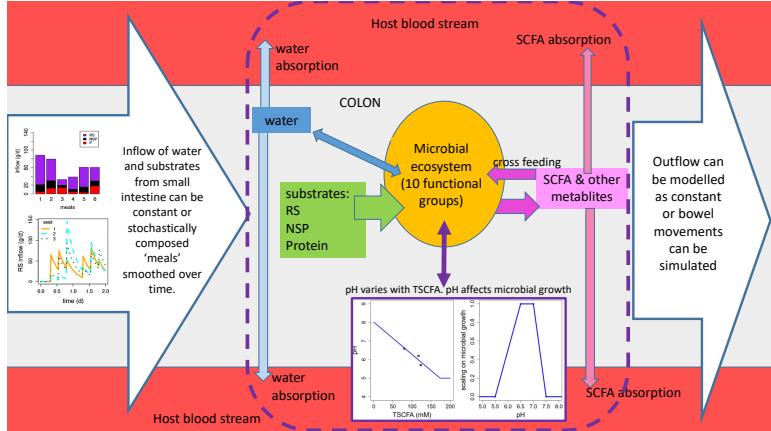


Figure 2: Model system with the microbial ecosystem comprising 10 microbial functional groups (Table 1) which consume substrates (RS, NSP and protein) and water. The microbes produce metabolites some of which are consumed by other MFGs ('cross-feeding'). SCFA and water are absorbed through the colon wall (at a different specific rates). The system shown within the dashed line is repeated in each of the modelled regions of the colon (proximal, transverse, and distal) with the contents of the previous region, flowing into the next. The first compartment (proximal) has inflow from the small intestine - this can be constant inflow or simulated meals whose composition varies randomly in time. The third model compartment (distal) has outflow to stool which can be constant or evacuation via bowel movements can be simulated. pH varies with the TSCFA concentration and affects the rate of microbial growth differently for each MFG.

Table 1: Microbial functional groups included in the model (and the R package microPop (Kettle et al., 2018)) and described by Kettle et al. (2015). Users should be aware that the parameter values given in the data frames in the software will almost certainly change with increasing knowledge of gut microbiota and in some cases are simply a “best guess”.

microPop Name	Abbr.	Description	Examples
Bacteroides	B	Acetate-propionate-succinate group	<i>Bacteroides</i> spp., <i>Prevotella</i> spp., <i>Akkermansia muciniphila</i> (Verrucomicrobia)
NoButyStarchDeg	NBSD	Non-butyrate-forming starch degraders	<i>Ruminococcaceae</i> related to <i>Ruminococcus bromii</i> . Also includes certain <i>Lachnospiraceae</i>
NoButyFibreDeg	NBFD	Non-butyrate-forming fibre degraders	<i>Ruminococcaceae</i> related to <i>Ruminococcus albus</i> , <i>Ruminococcus flavefaciens</i> . Also includes certain <i>Lachnospiraceae</i>
LactateProducers	LP	Lactate producers	<i>Actinobacteria</i> , especially <i>Bifidobacterium</i> spp., <i>Collinsella aerofaciens</i>
ButyrateProducers1	BP1	Butyrate Producers	<i>Lachnospiraceae</i> related to <i>Eubacterium rectale</i> , <i>Roseburia</i> spp.
ButyrateProducers2	BP2	Butyrate Producers	Certain <i>Ruminococcaceae</i> , in particular <i>Faecalibacterium prausnitzii</i>
PropionateProducers	PP	Propionate producers	<i>Veillonellaceae</i> e.g. <i>Veillonella</i> spp., <i>Megasphaera elsdenii</i>
ButyrateProducers3	BP3	Butyrate Producers	<i>Lachnospiraceae</i> related to <i>Eubacterium hallii</i> , <i>Anaerostipes</i> spp.
Acetogens	A	Acetate Producers	Certain <i>Lachnospiraceae</i> , e.g. <i>Blautia hydrogenotrophica</i>
Methanogens	M	Methanogenic archaea	<i>Methanobrevibacter smithii</i>

117 Table 2 gives summary results of the model simulations without bowel move-
 118 ments but with varying pH for each bowel region. Fig. 3 shows results from
 119 more simulations but for the distal colon only. Fig. 3a shows that although
 120 bowel movements make a difference to the total biomass and the TSCFA they
 121 do not have a large effect on the community composition or the SCFA ratios.
 122 Thus in the interests of model simplicity we decide to not include bowel move-
 123 ments in later simulations. However, varying pH with TSCFA can be seen to
 124 make a very large difference to the microbial community (Fig. 3b) and also
 125 improves the SCFA ratios with respect to our verification criteria. The addition
 126 of meals makes a significant difference which increases with increasing transit
 127 time (Fig. 3c). In Fig. 4 the time series output from the model shows how
 128 the meals-inflow allows the community to experience large shifts over time (on
 129 a much longer time scale than the variations in the input), as opposed to the
 130 fixed state approached using a constant substrate inflow.

131 Fig. 1C shows the average pH and TSCFA for the proximal, transverse
 132 and distal compartments. It can be seen that blue (meals) and red (continuous
 133 inflow) dots show the same basic trends. The decrease in TSCFA with transit
 134 time has been shown experimentally (Lewis and Heaton, 1997); in section 2 of

135 the Supp. Info. we suggest a mathematical explanation for this based on the
 136 supposition that the specific rate of absorption of water through the gut wall is
 137 slower than that for SCFA.

138 Regarding Table 2, for some criteria, e.g. pH, the continuous inflow setting
 139 gives results closer to our verification values, but in other cases, e.g. A:B:P
 140 in distal colon, simulating meals gives closer results. Note that we consider a
 141 transit time of 1 day the most typical of the three transit times, and the one
 142 that should be compared with our verification criteria, the others are included to
 143 show the variation in results. Ideally TSCFA should be 123, 117 and 80 mM for
 144 prox., trans., dist. but the best match we have to this is for a 3 d transit time and
 145 continuous inflow. This is most likely due to the fact that our model has fixed
 146 rates of specific absorption of SCFA and water throughout the colon. However,
 147 our TSCFA values are within a reasonable range and display the general trend
 148 of decreasing TSCFA from the proximal to distal colon. The microbe output,
 149 i.e. the outflow of fecal microbes is steady at around 20 g d^{-1} in all cases which
 150 fits well in the verification range ($14\text{--}28 \text{ g d}^{-1}$). The water fraction is the ratio
 151 of the rate of fecal water over the rate of water flowing into the colon, since 90%
 152 of water is absorbed this should be 0.1. This is approximately correct for our 1
 153 d simulations (0.14) but, as expected, when transit time increases this decreases
 154 significantly. In summary, comparing these simulation results with our list of
 155 model verification criteria shows that in general our model is fit for purpose,
 156 and that the inclusion of meals-inflow and varying pH improve our simulations.

Table 2: Summary of model results (for comparison with our list of criteria) for 3 different transit times, with meals or continuous inflow and with pH varying with TSCFA. Microbe output is the mass of microbes leaving the colon per day and the water fraction is amount of water leaving the colon per day divided by the amount entering. All simulations were run for 28 days and the results shown are the average over days 7–28. The results for the simulations with meals are averaged over 4 random seeds. ‘A:B:P dist’ refers to the Acetate:Butyrate:Propionate ratio (mM) in the distal colon.

transit time	Meals			Continuous inflow		
	1d	2d	3d	1d	2d	3d
TSCFA prox (mM)	115.3	110.3	105.2	124.4	123.5	122.1
TSCFA trans (mM)	102.1	88.1	83.4	75.5	96.1	111.1
TSCFA dist (mM)	107.6	64.8	69.0	89.5	62.0	83.3
A:B:P dist (mM)	62:28:17	31:23:10	34:23:12	56:27:7	38:18:6	59:17:7
pH prox	6.0	6.1	6.2	5.9	5.9	5.9
pH trans	6.2	6.5	6.6	6.7	6.4	6.1
pH dist	6.2	6.9	6.8	6.5	6.9	6.6
microbe output (g d^{-1})	20.2	20.1	20.1	20.0	20.1	20.0
water fraction	0.14	0.04	0.02	0.14	0.04	0.02

157 Model Experiments

158 We now use our model to simulate two scenarios – firstly, the effects of decreasing
 159 total carbohydrate intake and secondly, the effects of changing carbohydrate
 160 composition (whilst keeping total intake fixed) on the microbial community and
 161 associated SCFA production. Comparing our simulations with data from human

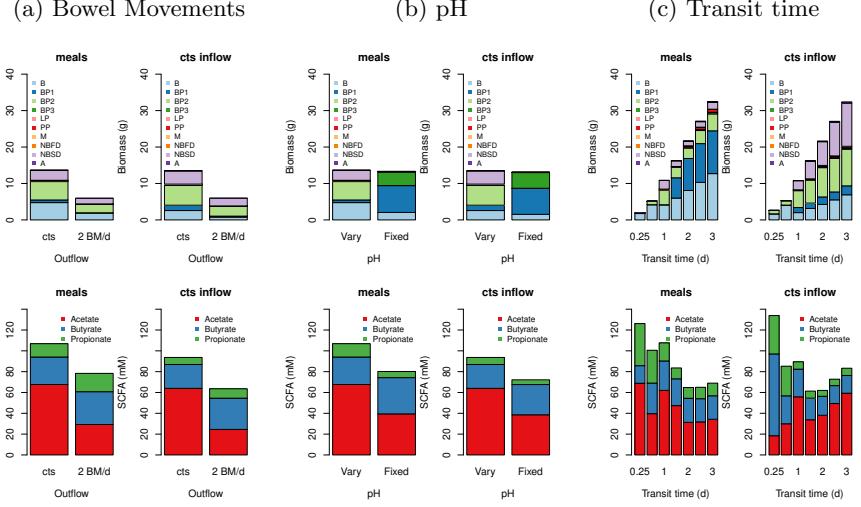


Figure 3: Summary results (averaged over days 7-28 and over random seeds) for the distal compartment for continuous inflow or fluctuating inflow (i.e. ‘meals’) for continuous outflow from colon or for 2 bowel movements per day (‘2 BM/d’). The RS fraction is 0.78 (i.e. 78% of the dietary carbohydrate is resistant starch and 22% is NSP) and the transit time is 0.93 d for a), 1.25 d for b) and at 0.25, 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5 and 3 days for c). The top row shows the biomass of each group, the bottom row shows the SCFA.

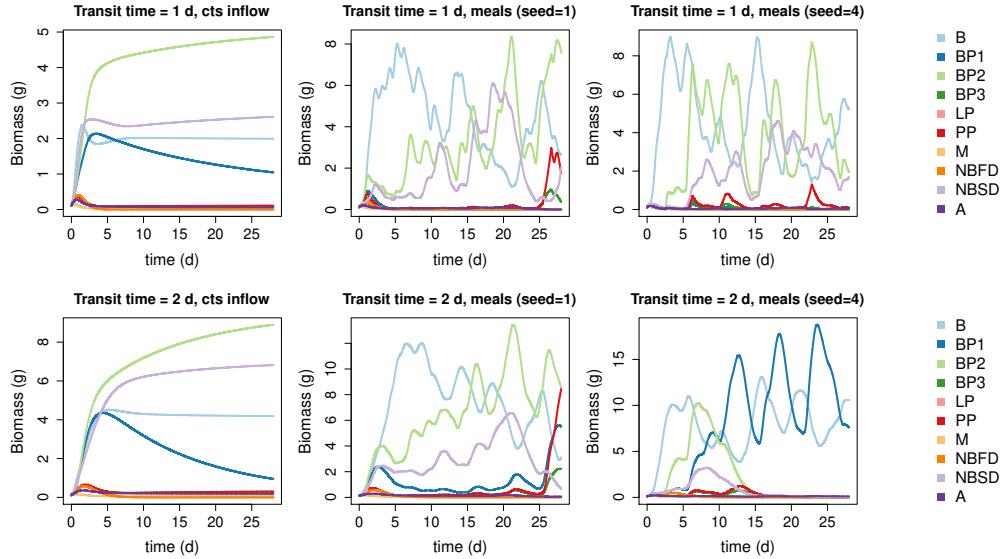


Figure 4: Simulation results for the distal compartment for continuous inflow (first plot on each row) or fluctuating inflow (i.e. ‘meals’) for transit times of 1 d (top row) and 2 d (bottom row) and for 2 random seeds. Modelled pH varies with TSCFA and the RS fraction is 0.78. There are no bowel movements (i.e. outflow is continuous). See Table 1 for microbial groups.

volunteer experiments is not straightforward since in order to run our model, ingested food must be translated to substrates reaching the colon. This is problematic due to unknown water consumption and transit times and uncertainties associated with the absorption rates of the ingested carbohydrate and protein higher up the digestive tract. Thus we do not attempt to reproduce human experiments but rather we run simulations based on variations to our standard model set up and then compare our results qualitatively with available data.

Effects of total dietary carbohydrate

In this model experiment we investigate the effects of decreasing carbohydrate on the microbial community. Here we compare our results qualitatively with the human dietary study of Duncan et al. (2007) which explored the impacts of carefully controlled decreases in carbohydrate intake upon weight loss and microbial fermentation products in obese subjects using 3 diets – a maintenance (M) diet, a high protein, moderate carbohydrate diet (HPMC) and a high protein, low carbohydrate diet (HPLC) (see Fig. 5 for details). This is of course, the composition for ingested food, which is not easily translated into substrate concentrations entering the colon. However, we can look at the general trends in SCFA and microbial composition with changing colonic carbohydrate intake rate. Thus, in these model experiments we keep protein inflow to the colon at 10 g d^{-1} (our default value) and then increase inflowing carbohydrate from 10 g d^{-1} to 60 g d^{-1} in 10 g d^{-1} intervals. To include the effects of different carbohydrate composition we run the model for an resistant starch (RS) fraction of either 0.2 or 0.78 (the default value), with non-starch polysaccharides (NSP) making up the remaining carbohydrate in each case. Although subject to large uncertainties, we estimate the RS fractions for the Duncan et al. (2007) experiments of 0-0.6 (M diet), 0-0.68 (HPMC) and 0-0.12 (HPLC) (based on RS is 0-20% of ingested starch (Capuano et al., 2018) and bio-available NSP is 75% of ingested NSP (Slavin et al., 1981)). Due to the low fibre nature of many of these simulations we run the model with a slightly longer transit time of 1.5 d and for both continuous inflow and meals.

Fig. 6 shows the SCFA results from our model experiment and Fig. 5 shows the results from the in vivo experiment. It is very clear, from both the model and in vivo results that the proportion of butyrate increases as the amount of carbohydrate in the diet increases. Furthermore, both model and in vivo results show an increase in TSCFA with carbohydrate intake rate. Since Duncan et al. (2007) also look at the relationship between butyrate concentration and grams of carbohydrate eaten per day we plot butyrate against carbohydrate entering the colon (Fig. 7) to compare with their Fig. 1. In both cases, butyrate concentration increases with incoming carbohydrate. Furthermore, as seen in both the model and the data, the percentage of butyrate increases with carbohydrate intake (Fig. 7).

In terms of microbial composition, Fig. 6 shows the results from our simulations are reasonably consistent across inflow type (meals or continuous), with B dominating at low carbohydrate intake. When the RS fraction is low (i.e. when carbohydrate is made up of 80% NSP) then NBFD increase with increased C intake. Whereas when C is mostly RS then NBSD and BP1 increase with C. In both cases BP2 increase with increasing C intake.

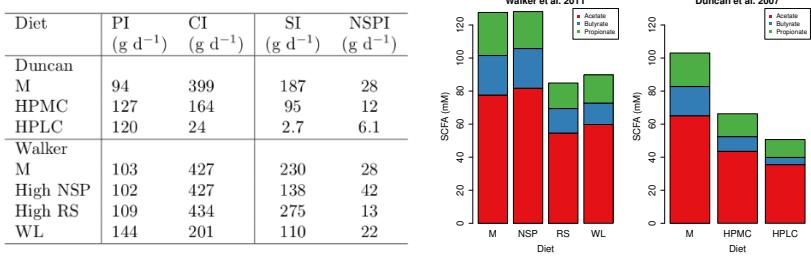


Figure 5: Table on left shows the dietary intake for two human studies (Duncan et al. (2007) and Walker et al. (2011)). PI, CI, SI and NSPI refer to ingested dietary protein, carbohydrate, starch and NSP. Note, starch value for the high RS diet in the Walker et al. (2011) study included 26 g commercial RS. Bar plots show SCFA data from these studies.

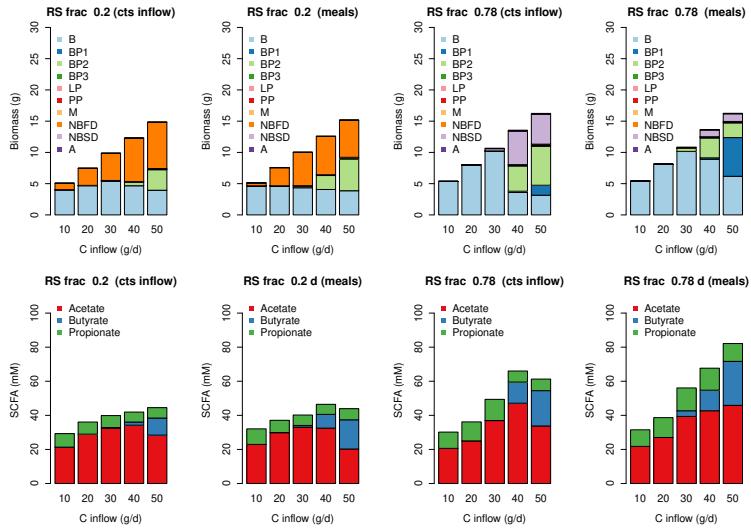


Figure 6: Simulated Biomass and SCFA results for increasing carbohydrate inflow. Simulations are run with continuous substrate inflow (cts) and with ‘meals’ for a transit time of 1.5 days. The results are the average over the last 3 weeks of a 28 day simulation and ‘meals’ is the average over 4 stochastically-generated simulations.

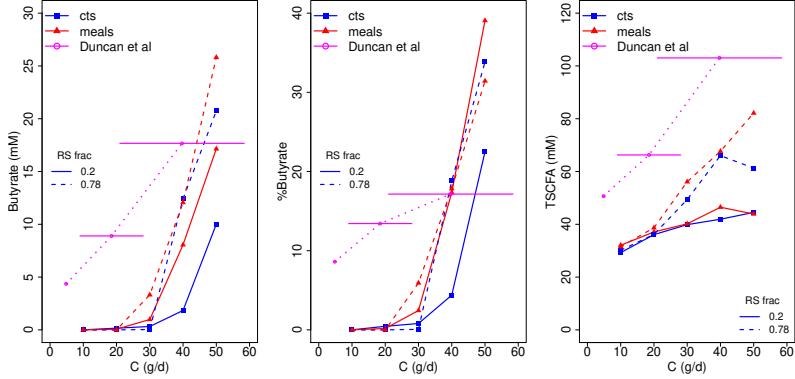


Figure 7: Plot of modelled butyrate, %butyrate and TSCFA against grams of carbohydrate entering the colon each day. Data from Duncan et al. (2007) is shown in magenta - due to uncertainties in converting ingested starch to RS entering the colon there are large error bars on the amount of C (g/d). Error bars show C estimated by the sum of 75% of ingested NSP plus 0-20% of ingested starch.

Effects of carbohydrate composition

Here we use the model to simulate the effects of changing carbohydrate composition on the microbial community composition by changing the ratio of RS to NSP whilst keeping the same amount of total incoming carbohydrate. Fig. 8 show a summary of the model results. Although there are differences between the continuous inflow/meals, and also for the different transit times (1 d and 3 d), the modelled trends are generally similar, showing a significant shift in community as the fraction of RS increases, an increase in TSCFA and changes in the SCFA ratios. We compare our results with a human dietary study (Walker et al. (2011), Salonen et al. (2014) and references therein) examining the impact of switching the major type of carbohydrate from wheat bran (NSP) to resistant starch. Volunteers were provided successively with a maintenance diet, diets high in RS or NSPs and a reduced carbohydrate weight loss (WL) diet, over 10 weeks (Fig. 5).

There are very large discrepancies between the SCFA predicted by our model (Fig. 8) and the measured SCFA data (Fig. 5). Our model predicts an increase in TSCFA as proportion of RS increases whereas total fecal SCFA were significantly lower for the RS and WL diets compared to the other two diets (in which NSP is higher). One possible explanation is that fermentation of RS occurs in more proximal regions of the colon compared with NSP fibre fermentation, such that there is greater absorption of the SCFA products. A second possibility, also likely, is that transit times were longer for the RS diet than for the NSP diet, which we predict would result in decreased SCFA concentrations. In our model the effect of the RS fraction on TSCFA is greater than the effect of transit time so we do not see this in Fig. 8.

The human study also included detailed compositional analysis of the fecal microbiota (Walker et al. (2011), Salonen et al. (2014)) that revealed specific responses mainly by different groups of Firmicutes bacteria to the RS and NSP

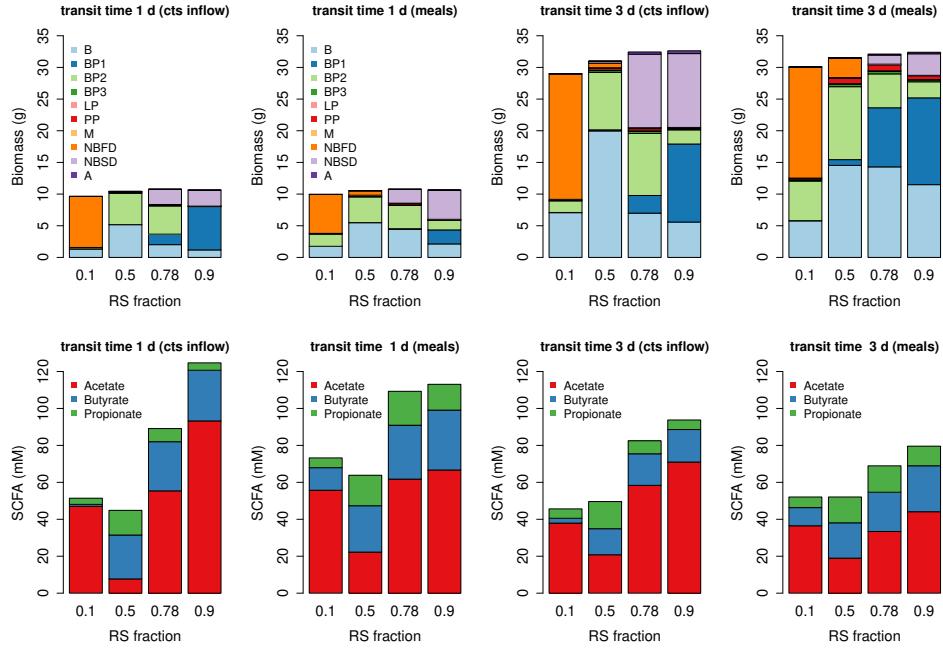


Figure 8: Biomass and SCFA results for changing the RS fraction of inflowing carbohydrate with continuous substrate inflow ('cts inflow') and with 'meals'. Protein and carbohydrate inflow are 10 and 50 g d⁻¹ respectively. The results are the average over the last 3 weeks of a 28 day simulation and 'meals' is the average over 4 stochastically-generated simulations.

diets. This information was particularly important for the phylogenetic assignments to the functional groups used here and previously in the model of Kettle et al. (2015). Our modelling predicts striking shifts in the microbial community, especially involving the NBSD, NBFD and butyrate-producing groups, with changing proportions of RS and NSP fibre (Fig. 8). We should also note that in the volunteer experiments many bacterial species were not significantly altered by the RS-NSP switch *in vivo* (Walker et al., 2011) indicating that many may be generalists, able to switch quickly between energy sources.

Discussion

The development of a complex model of the microbial community in the human colon, whose simulations compare well with data, represents a significant step forward in this field. Previous models have been based on simpler microbial models (e.g. Cremer et al. (2017), Munoz-Tamayo et al. (2010), Moorthy et al. (2015)), or have not shown such a good agreement with data (e.g. Smith et al. (2021)). Our previous complex model community consisted of 10 functional groups, but the model was designed only to simulate continuous culture conditions in a chemostat (Kettle et al., 2015). Translating this 10-group model into an *in vivo* setting has required introducing multiple gut compartments, and the

absorption of water and SCFA, followed by comparison with generally observed characteristics of the system. We were then able to use this model to examine the predicted impact of changes in the amount and type of non-digestible carbohydrate (fibre) present in human diets upon concentrations of fermentation products (SCFA) in different gut compartments and in stool. At the same time, we predict the likely impact of dietary changes and variations in gut transit upon microbiota composition and fermentation products. The model must be regarded as work in progress particularly with respect to microbiota composition. Predictions can however become improved and refined as more information becomes available in time.

Assignments of microbial taxa to our ten functional groups were based initially on evidence from cultured isolates. These assignments have since been supported and greatly extended by analysis of genes diagnostic for different fermentation pathways within genomes and metagenomes (Reichardt et al., 2014) and by molecular detection of species enriched within the community by defined growth substrates in chemostat experiments (Duncan et al., 2016) and dietary intervention studies (Salonen et al., 2014). Nevertheless, these assignments inevitably remain provisional and incomplete and we do not claim that the model predictions can be made precise at a phylogenetic level. More emphasis is placed in our model on the prediction of metabolic outputs based on microbial transformations and interactions. While there is relatively little phylogenetic overlap for example between producers of propionate and butyrate (Reichardt et al. (2014), Louis and Flint (2017)) there are many cases where individual species are known to use multiple alternative substrates as energy sources, which complicates assignments. For this reason, more weight was given to fermentation pathways than to substrate preferences in defining the functional groups. It may well be worthwhile to increase the number of functional groups in the future. The large B group for example currently includes members of the Bacteroidetes phylum, but its characteristics are mainly based on well-studied members of the Bacteroides genus. We know that Prevotella is another highly abundant genus of Bacteroidetes in the human colon, but the two genera tend not to co-occur at high levels in the same individuals (Wu et al. (2011), Chung et al. (2020)). Less is known about human colonic Prevotella, for which there are relatively few cultured representatives, making it premature to create a separate grouping, but this would clearly be desirable in the future as their prevalence is reported to affect health and responses to dietary intervention.

The parameter values for the microbial groups used in our model are from the intrinsic data frames in the microPop package (the only changes are to LactateProducers). Although the work presented here did not attempt to fit particular parameters to data, as we focussed on expanding the scope of the model (i.e. changing the environment from fermentor to colon), these values are easy to alter, e.g. Wang et al. (2020) changed many of these parameters to achieve a better model fit to their data. Furthermore, it is also possible to include any number of strains (with varying parameter values) within each functional group in order to add more variation in outcome (see Kettle et al. (2015)) but we did not do this here in the interests of computational time. It should also be noted that the parameter values are highly uncertain in many cases and within each of our functional groups there will be large variability due to adaptation and evolution. Given this, we do not claim that the model response is necessarily representative of what may happen in an individual's

305 gut, rather it can be used as an aid to gain insight into the relative importance
306 of the different processes we are currently aware of and potentially to highlight,
307 those we are not.

308 In addition to this, it must be noted that the default diet chosen here with
309 10 g of protein and 50 g of carbohydrate fibre reaching the colon each day could
310 be revised for any given population. However, converting from quantities of
311 ingested food to substrate inflow to the colon is highly uncertain with large
312 variations between studies, as well as technical issues with measuring this accu-
313 rately. With more time, it would be interesting to investigate a larger range of
314 typical diets but this was beyond the scope of the current work.

315 In summary, although performing reasonably well, the model has the poten-
316 tial to be considerably improved simply by altering the parameter values and
317 existing settings, however, more fundamental changes such as those listed below
318 could also be investigated in future work:

- 319 • Adding more functional groups or pathway switches in the existing func-
320 tional groups. For example at present only the *Bacteroides* group can
321 utilise protein but it is now known that some butyrate producers can also
322 utilise amino acids (Louis and Flint, 2017)
- 323 • Our pH relation with TSCFA is very simplistic and could potentially be
324 improved, although host secretions mean this is not necessarily straight-
325 forward.
- 326 • Currently we set the transit time for the colon and then this is split be-
327 tween the 3 model compartments based on their relative sizes. An interest-
328 ing addition would be to alter transit time based on the composition of the
329 various substrates entering the colon. For example, increasing residence
330 time for high protein and/or low fibre diets. Due to variation in individual
331 response this may need to include significant uncertainty ranges.
- 332 • Related to this is changing the absorption rate of water through the gut
333 wall based on the diet, for example more water could remain in the gut
334 on a high fibre diet.

335 To conclude, our model helps to explain some important, but poorly under-
336 stood, relationships that have been reported from human dietary intervention
337 studies, e.g. an increase in fecal total SCFA concentrations with faster gut tran-
338 sit. Gut transit is also shown to have potentially important consequences for
339 microbiota composition and gut metabolism. In addition, the model confirms
340 that the amount and type of non-digestible carbohydrate in the diet has the
341 potential to cause major changes in microbiota composition. The nature of
342 such changes is, however, predicted to be influenced by patterns of meal feeding
343 and by any effects of dietary components (e.g. dietary fibre) upon gut tran-
344 sit. Human studies suggest that they will also depend on the initial microbiota
345 composition. There is potential to use the model to explore how the presence of
346 particular functional groups (such as lactate-utilizers (Wang et al 2020)) within
347 an individuals microbiota can influence their gut metabolism and response to
348 dietary intervention. This may indeed be one of the most intriguing and fruitful
349 applications of such modelling approaches in the future.

350 **Materials and methods**

351 **Software**

352 To facilitate continued research and future model development by other re-
353 searchers we provide all model code on github (<https://github.com/HelenKettle/microPopGut>).
354 The R package microPopGut is contained in the file microPopGut_1.0.tar.gz.
355 This can be downloaded and installed in R using `install.packages('microPopGut_1.0.tar.gz')`.

356 **Microbial Model**

357 The microbial functional group model is based on the model described by Ket-
358 ttle et al. (2015) and implemented using the R package microPop (Kettle et al.,
359 2018). The microbial groups include producers of the three major SCFA de-
360 tected in fecal samples (acetate, butyrate and propionate) together with utilizers
361 of acetate, lactate, succinate, formate and hydrogen (see Table 1 for a summary,
362 or refer to Kettle et al. (2015) for more detail). The model and its equations
363 are described in detail by Kettle et al. (2015) and Kettle et al. (2018) so only
364 a brief overview is given here. The microbial groups are defined as data frames
365 within the R package and these are shown in section 3 of the Supp. Info..

366 The growth substrates available in the large intestine are divided into four
367 categories: protein (P), non starch polysaccharides (NSP), resistant starch (RS)
368 and sugars (and oligosaccharides and sugar alcohols); for simplicity, all carbo-
369 hydrate units are regarded as being hexoses. NSP comprise major components
370 of dietary fibre including the structural polysaccharides of the plant cell wall
371 (cellulose, xylan, pectin), whereas RS refers to the fraction of dietary starch
372 that resists digestion in the small intestine. We consider 10 major metabolites
373 that arise from substrate fermentation: acetate, propionate, butyrate, lactate,
374 succinate, formate, hydrogen, carbon dioxide, methane and ethanol. Six of these
375 metabolites (acetate, lactate, succinate, formate, hydrogen and carbon dioxide)
376 are also considered as substrates, because they are known to be consumed by
377 some groups (cross-feeding). It is well known that pH affects growth rate there-
378 fore each group is assigned a preferred range of pH within which it can reach its
379 maximum growth rate, but outside of which, its growth is reduced or zero. We
380 model the rate of bacterial growth using Monod kinetics and assume that from
381 1 g of resource, Y g of biomass is produced. We assume that resource that is
382 taken up by microbes, but not used to produce biomass, is converted to metabo-
383 lites. If not all of the resource is converted to biomass or to the metabolites
384 represented in our model, it is discarded. This applies, for example, to many
385 diverse fermentation products of proteins (e.g. phenols, amines) that are not
386 among the 10 major products covered by the model. Although the model was
387 initially developed to be run with multiple strains within each functional group,
388 in the current work we do not do this due to the high CPU time associated with
389 multiple compartments.

390 **Inflow to colon**

391 **Incoming substrates and water**

392 The main sources of nutrient for microbiota in the colon are complex dietary
393 carbohydrates that are not absorbed higher up the digestive tract. We use

Table 3: Summary of default values used in the model. Parameter values for the microbial groups are given in the Supp. Info. (section 3)

Symbol	Description	Default Value
T_t	transit time through colon	1.25 d
\dot{P}_{diet}	protein inflow rate	10 g d ⁻¹
\dot{C}_{diet}	carbohydrate inflow rate	50 g d ⁻¹
\dot{W}_{diet}	water inflow rate	1100 g d ⁻¹
\dot{M}	mucin inflow rate	5 g d ⁻¹
K_M	half saturation constant for Mucin breakdown	0.5 g l ⁻¹
a_w	rate of water absorption by host	3 d ⁻¹
a_z	rate of SCFA absorption by host	9.6 d ⁻¹

394 a default value of 50 g d⁻¹ of carbohydrate, C, in our model and we vary the
 395 proportion of this which is NSP or RS using the RS fraction (i.e. RS/(RS+NSP))
 396 where RS+NSP=C). Based on Cremer et al. (2017) and references therein,
 397 about 15 g of bio-available NSP and 30-40 g of RS enter the colon per day
 398 which gives us an RS fraction of 0.67-0.9 with average value of 0.78 which we
 399 use as our default value. According to Yao et al. (2016) less is known regarding
 400 dietary proteins, P, that escape digestion to reach the large intestine, although it
 401 is estimated that around 6 - 18 g P reaches the large intestine daily, the majority
 402 from the diet and a small proportion from endogenous origins. Given this, here
 403 we assume that 10 g d⁻¹ of undigested P reaches the colon from dietary intake
 404 along with a small amount from mucin degradation (approx. 1 g d⁻¹). Phillips
 405 and Giller (1973) state that water enters at approximately 1.5 l d⁻¹ and about
 406 90% of this is absorbed by the colon. Stephen and Cummings (1980) states that
 407 normal fecal daily output in Britain is 100-200 g d⁻¹ of which 25-50 g d⁻¹ is
 408 solid matter and the rest (50-175 g d⁻¹) is water. Thus if 90% is absorbed then
 409 this indicates water inflow in the range 0.5 - 1.75 l d⁻¹. The midpoint of this
 410 range is 110 g d⁻¹ of water outflow which, if 90% is absorbed, implies that the
 411 inflow of water is approximately 1100 g d⁻¹. This will clearly vary depending
 412 on the host's oral water intake but we use 1100 g d⁻¹ as our default value. The
 413 default inflow values are summarised in Table 3.

414 Meals

415 The normal human diet does not consist of continuous fixed inflow of substrate;
 416 for a more realistic substrate inflow to the colon we simulate eating 3 meals a
 417 day with randomly varying composition. We then approximate the passage of
 418 these meals through the stomach and small intestine to obtain a smoothed time
 419 series for substrate entering the colon. Note that we are not simulating all the
 420 food ingested by the host (most of which will not reach the colon) but rather
 421 simply trying to produce a more realistic time series for the substrates that we
 422 know reach the colon.

423 We specify three meals per day each with a duration of 30 minutes. This
 424 time-series is then passed through a one-compartment ordinary differential equa-
 425 tion model representing the time spent in the stomach and small intestine (es-
 426 timated to take 7 hours), i.e.

$$\frac{ds(t)}{dt} = s'(t)_{in} - vs(t) \quad (1)$$

427 where $v=3.4 \text{ d}^{-1}$ (inverse of 7 h transit time in days); $s(t)_{in}$ is time series
 428 representing 3 meals a day (g d^{-1}) and t is time in days. The inflow to the
 429 colon (i.e. the outflow from small intestine) is given by $vs(t)$. The composition
 430 (in terms of P, NSP, RS and water (W)) of these meals varies randomly around
 431 the mean of each component (Table 3) for each meal. To generate such random
 432 fluctuations we draw samples for each meal from a gamma distribution (since
 433 this is always above zero) defined by a scale parameter (γ_s) and the daily average
 434 inflow of the substrate (g d^{-1}). We assume the magnitude of the substrate
 435 fluctuations are proportional to the mean value. Preliminary simulations showed
 436 that γ_s equal to half the mean value of each substrate gave a good variation for
 437 P, RS and NSP, and for water variation we assumed γ_s was one tenth of the
 438 incoming daily flow. The distributions and flow patterns are shown in Fig. 9.

439 Mucin

440 There is a further input of protein and carbohydrate from the host via the
 441 breakdown of host-released mucin by many strains in the B group (Ravcheev
 442 and Thiele, 2017) and in our NBFD group (Crost et al., 2013). It is estimated
 443 that $2.7\text{-}7.3 \text{ g d}^{-1}$ of mucin, denoted \dot{M} , is secreted into the colon (Florin
 444 et al., 1991), therefore we take the midpoint value 5 g/d. We assume our mucin
 445 degraders break down 1 g of mucin into 0.05 g sulphate, 0.2 g P and 0.75 g C,
 446 based on Sung et al. (2017), but consider their yield on mucin to be negligible
 447 compared with growth on other substrates. We split C equally between NSP
 448 and RS - this arbitrary choice did not affect model results since C from mucin
 449 (3.75 g d^{-1} maximum) is much less than dietary C (50 g d^{-1}), but this should
 450 be revised if considering very different dietary drivers. Since the compartments
 451 of the colon are not equal-sized we assume that the rate of mucin entering the
 452 colon is divided through the model compartments proportional to their relative
 453 volumes. We assume this enters the colon at a fixed, continuous rate and mucin-
 454 derived P and C are a function of the mass of mucin degraders, D_M (B and
 455 NBFD), such that,

$$\dot{C}(t) = 0.75 \frac{D_M(t)}{D_M(t) + K_M W_v(t)} \dot{M} \quad (2)$$

$$\dot{P}(t) = 0.2 \frac{D_M(t)}{D_M(t) + K_M W_v(t)} \dot{M} \quad (3)$$

456 where C , P , D_M are in mass units and the over dot indicates a rate (e.g. g
 457 d^{-1}), t is time and W_v is the volume of water in the model compartment. K_M
 458 (g l^{-1}) is chosen such that if $D_M \ll K_M W_v$ then there is minimal breakdown
 459 of mucin and if $D_M \gg K_M W_v$ there is maximal breakdown. The smaller the
 460 value of K_M the more breakdown there will be at low concentrations of mucin
 461 degraders. We set $K_M=0.5 \text{ g l}^{-1}$ based on preliminary model simulations.

462 Absorption by host

463 SCFA and water are both absorbed by the host through the gut wall; over 95%
 464 of SCFA (Topping and Clifton, 2001) and approximately 90% of incoming water
 465 is absorbed (Phillips and Giller, 1973). Experiments by Ruppin et al. (1980)
 466 found that the absorption rates of SCFA to be approximately 0.4 h^{-1} (i.e. 9.6

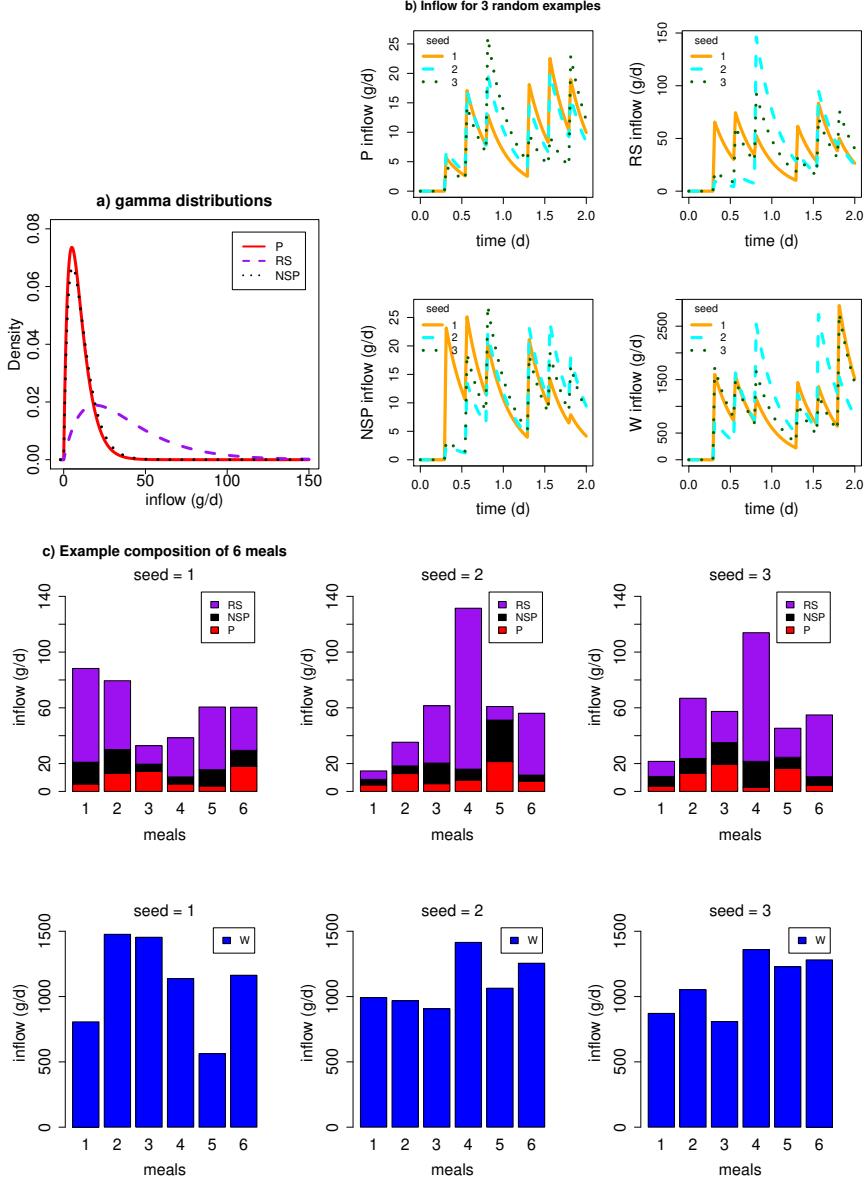


Figure 9: a) Gamma distribution from which random values are drawn to generate the composition of each meal (note water is not shown due to the large difference in magnitude between water and dietary substrates). b) The substrate inflow time series to the proximal colon after passing through the small intestine. Examples shown for 3 stochastic simulations starting with different seeds. c) Barplots showing the composition of 6 meals over 2 days for 3 different stochastic simulations.

467 d^{-1}) with little difference in rates between the different SCFA (Ruppin et al.
468 (1980), Topping and Clifton (2001)).

469 We can estimate mathematically the specific water absorption rate required
470 to give 90% absorption of inflowing water for a given number of compartments
471 in the colon (N) and a given transit time, T_t , using

$$a_W = \frac{16.95 - 9.72N + 1.77N^2}{T_t} \quad (4)$$

472 (see Supp. Info. Section 1.3 for the derivation). As a rough estimation, for
473 a 3 compartment model with a transit time 1-1.5 days, gives $a_W \approx 3 \text{ d}^{-1}$
474 (Supp. Info. Fig. S1a). Given this will not be significantly affected by the
475 microbial model (microbial uptake/production of water is small) this is a robust
476 estimation.

477 To estimate the value of the specific absorption rate of SCFA, a_Z , we used
478 a simple model (see Supp. Info. sections 1.1 and 1.4). Estimating the value
479 of the specific absorption rate of SCFA based on the values of SCFA given in
480 the verification criteria and given our estimate for a_W we found that it was
481 necessary for the specific absorption rate to change along the colon (see Supp.
482 Info. section 1.4). The best estimates were given by a_Z values of 25.2, 4.2 and
483 9.2 d^{-1} in the proximal, transverse and distal colon respectively. However, in
484 the interests of a robust model (i.e. the fewer parameter values, the better)
485 we made the decision to use one value for a_Z . Since the experimental value of
486 9.6 d^{-1} compares well with our estimate in the distal colon we set $a_Z=9.6 \text{ d}^{-1}$
487 throughout. It should be noted though that our model results could potentially
488 be improved by varying a_Z between model compartments.

489 pH

490 Calculating pH in our model is not straightforward due to a lack of necessary
491 state variables as well as pH buffering via secretions from the host. However,
492 observations tell us the pH in the colon goes from 5.7 in the proximal, 6.2 in
493 the transverse and 6.6 in the descending colon and TSCFA in these regions is
494 around 123 mM, 117 mM and 80 mM respectively (Cummings et al., 1987).
495 Therefore an approximate approach is to simply make pH a function of TSCFA.
496 Fitting a line through the above points gives us the following relationship

$$\text{pH} = 8.02 - 0.0174 \times \text{TSCFA}. \quad (5)$$

497 which we further limit by setting the minimum and maximum pH values at 5
498 and 8 respectively i.e. if the TSCFA values give predicted pH outside of this
499 range (Fig. 10).

500 The impact of pH on microbial growth is modelled via a pH limitation func-
501 tion whereby there is a range over which there is no limit on growth but outside
502 of this range the growth rate decreases linearly to reach zero at the specified
503 outer limits. Thus there are 4 parameters used to describe the pH tolerance – 2
504 for the inner range where there is no limit on growth and 2 for the outer range
505 outside which there is no growth – an example is shown in Fig. 10. The pH
506 tolerance range for each microbial group is specified under the entry ‘pHcorners’
507 in the data frame for each group and shown in Supp. Info. section 3.

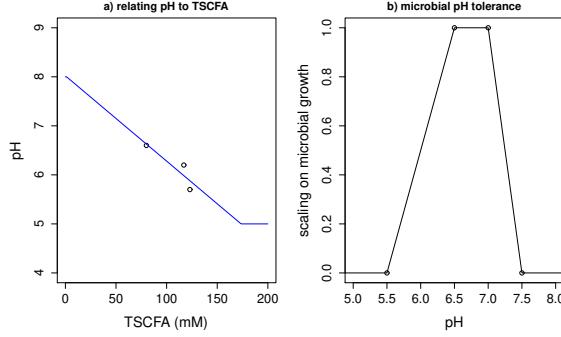


Figure 10: a) Relating pH to TSCFA using Eq. 5 and data from (Cummings et al., 1987). b) Example of microbial tolerance to pH. A pH tolerance function of this form is specified individually for each microbial group in our model.

508 Fecal outflow

509 Fecal outflow (g d^{-1}) at time, t , is given by $m_d(t)V_d$ where $m_d(t)$ is the mass
 510 in the distal colon (i.e. microbes, unconsumed substrate, microbial metabolites
 511 and water) and V_d is the specific wash out rate from the colon (the inverse of
 512 the time spent in the distal colon). For continuous outflow (as is used in most
 513 gut models) we compute the specific wash out rate from each compartment by
 514 assuming the fraction of time spent in compartment, i , is proportional to its
 515 volume fraction, thus

$$T_i = \frac{v_i}{v_{colon}} T_t \quad (6)$$

516 where v_i is the volume of compartment i and v_{colon} is the total volume of the
 517 colon. The specific wash out rate is then $V_i = 1/T_i$.

518 If we introduce bowel movements then, assuming the distal colon is approx-
 519 imately emptied for each bowel movement, the total transit time is given by

$$T_t = \sum_{i=1}^2 T_i + \frac{1}{N_{BM}} \quad (7)$$

520 where N_{BM} is the number of bowel movements per day. For example, using vol-
 521 ume measurements (Table 1B) and assuming a total transit time of 1 day would
 522 mean about 45% of the transit time is spent in the proximal and transverse
 523 colon and about 55% of the day spent in the distal, which would be similar to 2
 524 bowel movements per day. In model experiments where we vary the number of
 525 bowel movements per day we also change the time spent in the rest of the colon
 526 since we assume increased bowel movements are indicative of a general increase
 527 in passage rate. We estimate the wash out rate from the colon during a bowel
 528 movement, V_{BM} , by

$$V_{BM} = -\frac{\ln(f_d)}{\Delta t_{BM}} \quad (8)$$

529 where f_d is the fraction of mass left in the distal colon after the bowel movement
 530 and Δt_{BM} is the time taken for the bowel movement (d). For example, if a bowel
 531 movement takes 10 minutes to remove 90% of the contents of the distal colon
 532 then V_{BM} is 332 d^{-1} . This is not affected by the number of bowel movements
 533 per day.

534 **Acknowledgments**

535 We thank the Scottish Government's Rural and Environment Science and Ana-
536 lytical Services Division (RESAS) for funding this research.

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