Probiotics: Getting a Little Culture

The human gut is home to as many as 500 types of microbes. Many of these live in symbiosis with their human host — not causing harm but helping to maintain healthy digestion, produce certain essential vitamins and protect against disease.

Stress, travel, antibiotics and an unbalanced diet can upset the delicate balance of digestive flora. When this balance is upset, potentially harmful bacteria can flourish and cause digestive and other health problems.

Probiotics are “friendly” bacteria present in certain foods that can rebalance the digestive environment by replenishing depleted microbes or by counteracting overgrown microbes. Scientists believe that in addition to aiding digestion, probiotics may be effective in treating certain health problems. Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium are the best studied of the probiotics, but the possible therapeutic effects of Streptococcus, Saccharomyces and Escherichia coli are also being investigated.

What can probiotics do?

• Prevent diarrhea during and after a course of antibiotics or while traveling
• Prevent intestinal infections
• Prevent and treat recurrent vaginal yeast infections
• Promote regularity and reduce flatulence and bloating
• Help manage cholesterol
• Possibly prevent and treat inflammatory bowel disease, colon cancer, certain food allergies, respiratory infections and migraines.

How do probiotics work?

Scientists are unsure exactly how probiotics work, but they do know that probiotics can:

• Stimulate the immune system
• Destroy harmful bacteria
• Increase absorption of vitamins and minerals, especially B vitamins and calcium
• Improve digestion.

Which foods contain probiotics?

• Fermented milk products such as yogurt and kefir
• Miso
• Tempeh
• Sauerkraut and kim chee
• Acidophilus tablets, capsules and powders.

What should you look for in probiotic products?

• Reputable manufacturers
• Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium strains
• Large amounts of cultures — “billions” in supplements and “live, active cultures” in food
• Refrigerated products.

Cautions

Studies of probiotics — and people who have consumed fermented milk products for centuries with no ill effects — indicate that probiotics are not dangerous. People who are immunosuppressed or who have irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn’s disease or rheumatoid arthritis should check with their health care providers before taking any probiotic supplements.

The real question is whether probiotics are effective. Dietary supplements sold in health food stores aren’t regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and may not contain enough of the right kinds of probiotics in the forms that can be effective.

The probiotic cultures in yogurt are beneficial for people with lactose intolerance because these live cultures predigest lactose. However, most yogurts available in the supermarket do not contain enough probiotic cultures to be beneficial in other ways.

Stonyfield Farm and Horizon Organic brands add active, live cultures to their yogurts to make them therapeutic. Heating yogurt kills its live cultures, so be sure to eat it chilled or at room temperature if you’re hoping for probiotic benefits.

For more information about probiotics and whether you might benefit from them, ask your nurse practitioner.