



Probiotics for health

Literally translated, *probiotic* means “for life”. Commonly, the term refers to a vast array of beneficial bacteria and certain yeasts available as supplements. Indeed, having a vital and well- balanced population of microorganisms in our digestive tracts is essential. Resident bacteria in the colon synthesize nutrients including vitamin K, essential for blood clotting. Beneficial bacteria and yeast also aid in digestion and proper elimination, enhance immune function, optimize hormone metabolism, support detoxification, create food for the cells lining the digestive tract, and compete with potentially harmful species for space, thus protecting us from infections.

As many people are now aware, our flora can be damaged by antibiotic therapy. Healthy gut flora is also disrupted by steroidal drugs including cortisone, spermicides, stress, birth control pills, a diet containing excess sugars or alcohol, and certain herbs such as oregano oil.

So what?

Problems related to altered gut flora include digestive issues like bloating, gas, irritable bowel, Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis, as well as eczema, altered mood, allergies, and bladder infections. Imbalanced flora can also lead to an overgrowth of the yeast *Candida albicans*, creating symptoms beyond the gut including headaches, foggy thinking and yeast infections.

Evidence from randomized placebo-controlled clinical trials shows that supplemental probiotics support healthy immune system functioning, even measurably decreasing symptoms and duration of colds and ‘flus. As well, a number of studies have found that mom and infant supplementation results in less eczema, even in babies with strong family history of eczema and allergies. Probiotics are commonly prescribed to anyone taking antibiotics, and often form part of an individual treatment plan for any of the concerns listed above.

What to look for

An increasing number of food products claim to contain probiotics, and while some do, they are unregulated, and many contain negligible or subtherapeutic amounts. Because of this, supplements are the most reliable way to get probiotics.

While there are 400 - 500 different bacterial species found in the large intestine alone, there are a handful that should predominate, most commonly *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium* species. These are the species found in the majority of probiotic supplements. As specific formulations, dosing and potencies vary with particular health conditions, ask a naturopathic doctor to recommend the best supplement to optimize your health.

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