

Feeding Your Gut's Good Bacteria

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Media ads show smiling women bragging how their yogurt has improved “their intestinal transit time” and “digestive health”, what’s the fuss over products claiming to “keep you regular”? It’s amazing, gut health is now a topic for polite conversation!

You’ve probably heard of probiotics – those “friendly” bacteria found in fermented foods that may have potential health benefits, such as improved digestive function, reduced inflammation caused by bowel disease, reduced bouts of constipation, improved cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and reduced risk of colon cancer. More than 100 trillion bacteria live inside your body – most of which reside in the digestive tract. The field of probiotics has developed rapidly over the past 15 years and a variety of products have popped up on the market boldly claiming them as a “probiotic” food. Products such as Activia and DanActive by the Dannon Company are two examples. Susan Mills-Gray, Nutrition and Health Specialist with MU Extension shares, “The good news is that any fermented product contains this friendly bacteria, including the following: aged cheese, microbrew beers, cottage cheese, kimchi, miso, pickled ginger, pickles (brine-cured without vinegar), sauerkraut, tempeh, tofu, wine, and all yogurts. So you don’t necessarily need to spend money on the specially enhanced products you see heavily advertised.”

Mills-Gray adds, “Now the new trend is to add “prebiotics” to food products – for example Yo-Plus from Yoplait, Post’s LiveActive cereal and Minute Maid’s Digestive Wellbeing juice.” What’s prebiotics? The term refers to food ingredients that nourish probiotics. Typically they are fibers and certain sugars that we don’t digest or absorb, but that the good bacteria in our intestines feed on, thereby stimulating their growth and activity.

Prebiotics occur naturally in small amounts in many carbohydrate-rich foods -- whole grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables. Prebiotic –rich foods include: asparagus, bananas, barley, dried beans, microbrew beers, berries, cherries, dark chocolate, eggplant, garlic, fresh herbs, Jerusalem artichokes, leeks, oats, onions, peanuts, peas, red wine, soybeans, tea, whole rye and whole wheat.

Probiotics and prebiotics look promising, but will consuming them in enhanced foods or capsules make a notable difference to your health? There isn’t conclusive research at this time. Also, large amounts of probiotic and prebiotic rich foods can cause abdominal pain, gas, bloating, and diarrhea – which is what they are suppose to combat in the first place! So remember moderation is the key and normal foods can provide adequate “friendly bacteria” and the “food” those bacteria desire.

For more information contact your local MU Extension Center or this faculty member directly at mills-grays@missouri.edu.

Sources: University of California-Berkeley Wellness Letter, Medical News Today, Linda Douglas of GTC Nutrition, Elizabeth Lipske of Digestive Wellness and Denise Mann of PineMedia.

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