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Understanding Probiotics

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

When it comes to making healthy eating choices, there is a constant barrage of information. Fueled by a multi-billion dollar industry, marketers try to convince us that their products are just what we need to buy and eat more and more of to feel good and be healthy. When it comes to probiotics, for example, what do consumers need to know about them in order to make an informed purchasing decision?

Probiotics are the “friendly” bacteria that reportedly help improve or maintain health. Generally speaking, non-harmful bacteria are formed during the fermentation process. Fermented foods include all yogurts, aged cheeses, cottage cheese, pickles (brine cured without vinegar), sauerkraut, tempeh, tofu, kimchee, miso, micro-brewed beers and wine.

But “non-harmful” bacteria are not necessarily *helpful*. And even when a food contains bacteria, if processing destroys them and they are no longer live, they may be also rendered no longer beneficial. According to Dr. Joel B. Mason, MD, professor of nutrition and medicine at Tufts University and staff physician in the Divisions of Gastroenterology and Clinical Nutrition at Tufts Medical Center, “There are over one hundred different types of organisms that might be called ‘probiotics,’ and each one is very different.”

Research has shown, however, that certain strains help in specific situations. For example, for older hospitalized patients who might otherwise have diarrhea caused by broad-spectrum antibiotic therapy, the *Bifidobacterium* spp., *Saccharomyces* spp., *Lactobacilli* spp., and *Streptococcus* spp. reduced the likelihood of associated diarrhea. In general, certain probiotics help promote good digestion by fighting off bad bacteria in the gut, just as naturally-occurring good bacteria do.

On the other hand, research does not yet substantially support some claims touted by marketers of probiotic foods and supplements. These include claims that probiotics improve the immune system, reduce symptoms of the flu or colds or prevent constipation.

For a healthy eating plan, continue to make whole grains, vegetables and fruits, and lower fat fermented dairy options including yogurt, aged cheeses, or cottage cheese every day choices that are nutritious and help promote good digestion.

For more information on this or on any other topic contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local MU Extension office.

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