

[IMAGE]

A Primer on Probiotics

By James P. Meschino, DC, MS

The human large intestine houses more than 1,000 different types of bacteria, known as microflora. Studies in recent years have shown that supplementation with health-promoting strains of bacteria can exert beneficial effects in terms of preventing certain ailments and helping to better manage others. Let's learn more about gut-friendly bacteria – also known as *probiotics* – and why they're an essential element of good health.

The health-promoting effects of probiotics are reported to include improved digestion and absorption, vitamin synthesis (vitamin K, biotin and other B vitamins), inhibition of the growth of harmful bacteria and fungi, cholesterol reduction, and lowering of gas distension. In fact, more than 700 randomized, controlled human studies provide strong evidence that probiotic supplementation may aid in preventing or treating various GI tract disorders, promoting GI health, and preventing metabolic syndrome.

I suggest using a probiotic supplement that contains various strains of bacteria, ensuring the presence of *Bifidobacteria* and *Lactobacilli*. For example, the probiotic combination supplement shown to improve intestinal barrier function in a study on animals with colitis included *Lactobacillus casei*, *Lactobacillus plantarum*, *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, *Lactobacillus delbrueckii* (subspecies *bulgaricus*), *Bifidobacterium longum*, *Bifidobacterium breve*, *Bifidobacterium infantis* and *Streptococcus salivarius* (subspecies *thermophilus*).

A specific dosage of probiotic supplementation has yet to be standardized; thus, we are left at the mercy of the product manufacturers and the dosage recommendations listed on the label of the various products. However, probiotic supplementation has been shown to be superior to deriving probiotics from functional foods (e.g., yogurt). Supplementation has been shown to be a more consistent method of ensuring probiotic intake and provides a much higher dose. However, probiotic-containing foods can add some additional benefit in this regard.

From a safety standpoint, probiotics should be used with caution in children, elderly persons and individuals with major risk factors or multiple minor risk factors.

Remember that supplementation with *prebiotics* such as fructo-oligosaccharide (FOS) and inulin can also help spur the growth of friendly gut bacteria. Prebiotics are the food upon which friendly bacteria thrive. Many health outcomes available from probiotic supplementation have also been shown to occur with supplementation of prebiotics. Thus, daily ingestion with soluble fiber, as well as 1,000-5,000 mg of FOS and inulin, may be helpful in the prevention and management of some of the health conditions mentioned above. As well, it seems to make sense to take a prebiotic supplement in conjunction with probiotics to optimize the potential for probiotic bacteria to thrive in the large bowel.

Talk to your doctor about the health benefits of probiotics and for more information about safe use.

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