

Probiotics are the supplement containing beneficial bacteria which normally reside in the gastrointestinal tract. It is the balance between healthy and unhealthy bacteria which provides the internal ecosystem of our bodies we call, generally speaking; health. This may seem a bit foreign to you, but the old saying, "You are what you eat," is pretty much on target. So, much of our health depends on our gut and the fuel we provide our bodies. Unfortunately, in today's world, there are many contributors which lead to poor health. These include stress and overall poor nutritional and dietary choices. We simply do not eat like we used to, and we are paying the price for it in many ways. Now, let's cover some of the basics, because at the very least, I want you to be able to recognize some of the terminology.

The human gut contains an estimated 100 trillion bacteria, which weigh approximately three to five pounds. Humans acquire gut bacteria through their mother's birth canal and breast feeding. Roughly 30-40 species make up 90 percent of the total. These are the ones most important to gut health. Some of these bacteria are termed "good," while others are termed, "bad." For the sake of simplicity, we'll keep it this way during the article. Examples of good bacteria are Bifidobacterium, Lactobacillus acidophilus, and Lactobacillus bulgaricus. Bad bacteria examples include Salmonella, Clostridium, and yeasts, such as Candida. It's not the fact bad bacteria play a certain role in our bodies. Bad bacteria simply exist as part of our world.

Remember, the health of the gut ecosystem depends on the good bacteria holding the bad bacteria in check which produces this healthy balance. If the balance becomes disturbed and tipped favoring the bad bacteria and yeasts, then these bad organisms will grow, multiply, and cause health problems. This unhealthy balance is termed; Dysbiosis.

Some things which cause this unhealthy balance are antibiotics, increased sugar in the diet, alcohol, certain food additives, and stress. Please make a special note; bad bacteria and yeast thrive on sugar. Sugar in our diets has dramatically increased to unacceptable proportions, thus being a major contributor to creating gut flora imbalance. Poor gut health is associated with many problems, some of which include gas, bloating, constipation, obesity, bad breath, vaginal/bladder infections, high cholesterol, osteoporosis, anemia, vitamin/nutrient deficiencies, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Inflammatory Bowel Disease, asthma, arthritis, and even colon cancer. Because we eat so poorly these days compared to our past, the goal is to replace our good bacteria, which can now be accomplished with nutritional supplements.

Let's expound on a couple of drug categories. Obviously, there are needs for these medications, as they help us with certain pathological conditions. However, there is a cost to the human body when these drugs are used.

Antibiotics: There are over 100 million prescriptions for antibiotic drugs each year. They kill both good and bad bacteria. Following a course of antibiotics I think it may be a good idea to take high potency Probiotics twice a day for two weeks to repopulate the gut with good bacteria.

Antacids/Anti-reflux drugs: Remember, good bacteria thrive in an acidic environment. When this category of drugs is used, then there is an increased chance for the balance of good bacteria and bad bacteria to be tipped in favor of the bad organisms. Therefore, patients who take these types of drugs on a chronic, or long term basis may benefit from Probiotic supplementation.

Now, let's cover some benefits of Probiotics.

Healthy digestion of food and absorption of nutrients. Bad bacteria produce toxins which inflame the gut and decrease nutrient absorption.

Immune System Function-associated with activity in the gut.

Helps in production of B Vitamins and Vitamin K.

Improves symptoms of gas, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, and other conditions listed above

All this being said, who should take Probiotics?

Well, for one, I personally take Probiotics every day. Remember, our diets have significantly changed in this country. Healthy foods promote the desired nutritional balance in our bodies, which include the gut ecosystem. Our fast-paced world leads to many poor nutritional choices, so supplementation with Probiotics is worth consideration. In addition to the Probiotics, I also take fish oil and a multivitamin. There is a solid argument for taking these three supplements, in my opinion. This may or may not be reasonable for you, but I am telling you what I take and the reasoning behind it. Saying this, I strongly suggest discussing this topic with your personal physician, especially if you have taken a course of antibiotics or require antacids/anti-reflux medication.

Also, the human body has different gut micro flora at different ages. A newborn is first colonized by microbes at birth, from the mother and other environmental factors. In less than a week, there is a strong Bifidobacteria population, (good bacteria), outnumbering all other bacteria in the gut with a ratio of 1000 to 1. Older people begin to show a decrease in Bifidobacterium as they age. Because of this, there is increased risk to tip the balance in favor of the bad bacteria.

Women in particular utilize Probiotics for distinct needs. In the teen and childbearing years, there are risks for yeast infections. Menopause brings changes in vaginal flora, as the good bacteria decrease, while the bad bacteria increase, which results in discomfort and increased risk of infection. Probiotic use can help restore the balance to the good side.

This topic is gaining much wider exposure. I see commercials, articles, and coverage of the topic in some form, most every day. As you are bombarded with advertisements and advice, now you at least have an idea of what they speak. My advice and recommendation to you is to have a discussion with your doctor concerning this topic, especially if you take antibiotics or antacids/anti-reflux medications. Be forewarned, many doctors are not aware of some of the things discussed in this article, because we are too busy taking care of the many who are already sick. This is a new, exciting area where we are learning more every day. Personally, I keep an open mind to take in new information, process it, and check the literature surrounding the topic. From there, I pass it along to you, so you can at the very least make an informed decision regarding what you need to discuss with your family physician.

Thank you.

Dr. Steve

Steven L. Snodgrass, M.D., F.A.C.S. is a former Chief of Surgery who helps athletes and patients meet their special needs. The goal is to prevent injury/illness, and help patients return to wellness. He

created Dr. Steve's Pro Bites, which are a healthy, protein snack. You can learn more by visiting www.probites.com