



Probiotics for Healthier Digestion and Increased Immunity

Cold and flu sufferers, there may be a way to head off those irritating symptoms. New evidence suggests that **PROBIOTICS** -- good bacteria can aid in digestive and immune function.

What are probiotics? They are defined as live microbial feed supplements that beneficially affect the host animal by improving its intestinal microbial balance. Approximately 100 years ago, Elie Metchnikoff, the father of immunology, believed that lactic acid-producing bacteria (such as those found in yogurt) would suppress the growth of bad bacteria.

What are probiotics used for? Over 60 to 80 percent of our immune cells are associated with our gastroenterological system. Poor digestive health makes you more likely to catch a virus (cold or flu) or have a chronic illness. In most circumstances, doctors use probiotics to prevent diarrhea caused by antibiotics. Antibiotics kill "good" (beneficial) bacteria along with the bacteria that cause illness. A decrease in beneficial bacteria may lead to diarrhea. Probiotics may also help vaginal yeast and urinary tract infections and other intestinal illnesses. Doctors say the function of healthy bacteria in the body makes using probiotics a good choice especially for those who wish to try a non-drug approach. European and Asian countries have been incorporating probiotics into foods and treatments for years.

Are probiotics safe? Probiotic bacteria are already part of the normal digestive system and are considered safe. Probiotics work by balancing the levels of microorganisms in the intestines. They drive down the numbers of harmful bacteria. They also seem to boost the body's immune system. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) do not regulate dietary supplements in the same way it regulates medication. Probiotic supplements in the form of capsules, tablets, suppositories, powders are sold with limited or no research or regulation on their safety. Be sure to check with your doctor on supplement advice and amounts.

Probiotics food sources: Food sources are the safest way to get probiotics since they occur naturally in some foods and are added to others such as cereal or food bars. Examples are yogurt, milk, sauerkraut, tempeh, miso, soy drinks, and other beverages. Look for yogurt with little or no sugar. To offer benefit, the yogurt must contain active cultures. Most yogurt containers indicate whether active cultures are present. Yogurt is also an excellent source of protein, calcium, vitamin D and other nutrients that promote healthy bones and teeth. All of the foods listed above have additional nutritional and health benefits. So enjoy the food listed above as part of a balanced, healthy diet; a healthier immune and digestive system will be an added bonus.

Note: Talk to your doctor before using probiotics. They could interact with medicines such as antibiotics, immunosuppressive drugs or certain intestinal diseases.

Sources: CDC; WebMD; Medscape; Healthwise; MSNBC; ABC GMA