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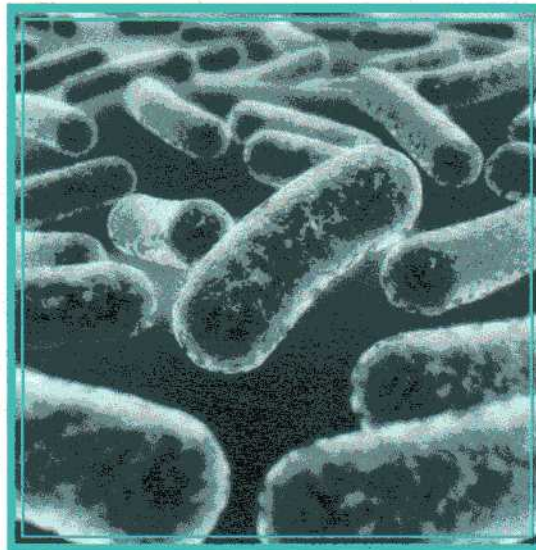
Probiotics: The "Good" Bugs

By: Leslie J. Farer

Maybe the thought of zillions of microscopic creatures inhabiting your intestines makes you cringe. That's not surprising – we often associate the word "bacteria" with disease-causing germs. It's true that pathogenic bacteria can produce severe, even devastating, health consequences. But their "good guy" counterparts, the beneficial or "friendly" bacteria, are essential to life: they contribute to the proper functioning of the immune and gastrointestinal systems, inhibit harmful pathogens, aid digestion, produce nutrients and B vitamins, and even

positive balance of all of these "residents," with sufficient numbers of beneficial bacteria keeping the less desirable pathogenic microbes in check.

The bacterial good-guys have appropriately been labeled "probiotics," literally, "for life." When introduced live into the gut in large numbers through the consumption of cultured or fermented food products, or dietary supplements, they are thought to promote health by improving intestinal microbial balance.



reduce the occurrence of allergies and some cancers. In fact, your intestinal tract is a mini-ecosystem home to over a hundred trillion bacteria, from four to five hundred different species, in addition to a host of other microorganisms such as yeasts, fungi and protozoa. The key to good health is a

The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization and the World Health Organization define probiotics as "live microorganisms, which, when administered in adequate amounts, confer a health benefit on the host." (Note that the organisms must be delivered live to the gut.)



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Printing & Publishing, Inc.
801 Ingraham Ave.
Haines City, FL 33844
1-800-713-2802
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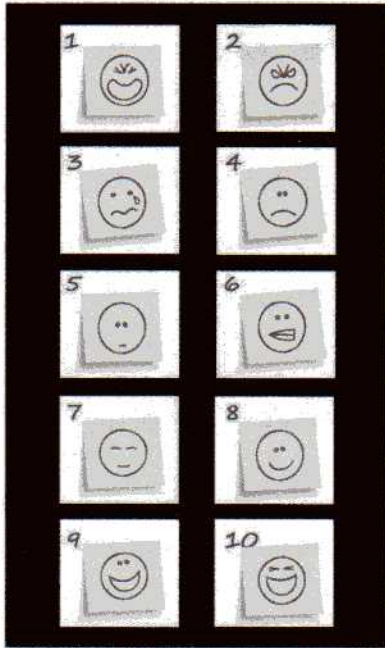
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October 2009

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Historically, probiotic cultures have been used for thousands of years, originally as a means of food preservation, in cultured milk products and fermented foods. Their health-promoting qualities have been widely touted for centuries, as in the case of the villagers of the Caucasus Mountains whose frequent consumption of yogurt has long been associated with good health and long life.

The most commonly used bacteria include species in the genus *Lactobacillus*, such as *L. acidophilus*, *L. GG*, and *L. casei*, and the genus *Bifidobacterium*, such as *B. bifidum* and *B. breve*. Within each genus are multiple species (for example, the genus *Lactobacillus* currently consists of over 125 species) and within each species, different strains.

Health Benefits of Probiotics

Since the first clinical trials in the 1930's, researchers have demonstrated the broad array of health conditions improved by probiotic supplementation.

Beneficial bacteria may best be known for their role in contributing to gastrointestinal health. Besides improving intestinal microbial balance, and enabling the digestive system to function optimally, probiotics have been shown to be especially useful in the treatment of diarrhea resulting from antibiotic use (which can decimate intestinal bacteria, both the good and the bad), rotaviruses (in young children) and traveling. Probiotic bacteria have also had some success in treating inflammatory bowel diseases, such as

irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, and Crohn's disease. Certain probiotics, including some *Lactobacilli*, may relieve constipation as well as alleviate symptoms of lactose intolerance and malabsorption by producing lactase in the intestine and stomach.

Since the gastrointestinal tract is intimately connected with the immune system, probiotics also play a role in the immune response. They inhibit the growth of a variety of dangerous microbes (including common bacterial pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *Shigella*) and enhance immune factors. Without a healthy microbial balance in the gut, the immune system can't function properly to ward off infection.

Probiotics also help reduce allergic reactions. For example, *Lactobacillus GG* may alleviate symptoms of food allergies such as those associated with milk protein. It has also been demonstrated that mothers taking *Lactobacillus GG* in the third trimester of pregnancy, and infants receiving the beneficial bacterium in their first six months, have a lower incidence of eczema, when there's a family history of the condition.

Probiotics have been shown effective in such diverse conditions as colon cancer, where they may reduce the incidence and number of tumors, autism, urinary tract infections, bacterial vaginosis, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.

Current and future research will undoubtedly uncover more applications for various strains of this large group of intriguing bacteria.

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