

These Bugs Make You Better

Probiotic bacteria love your guts.

By Dean Ornish, MD



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Delicate Balance

Bacteria are bad, right? Not always. Yes, they can cause illness. But some of them, called probiotics, are actually good for you. In short, while harmful bacteria hate your guts, probiotic bacteria love your guts.

There are trillions of the healthy kind in the body, especially in the mouth, gut and vagina. Those in your belly live in a complex ecological equilibrium with other bacteria and help keep harmful ones from growing. Some produce healthy vitamins B and K. They may also aid digestion, improve absorption of nutrients, help reduce the formation of carcinogens and enhance immune function.

But many forces can throw off this delicate balance. Among them: aging, alcohol, poor diet, chronic illness and possibly even stress. Antibiotics are particularly troublesome. They destroy many of the beneficial bacteria on the way to killing the disease-causing ones they're prescribed to treat.

When the balance in the digestive tract is disrupted, some of the harmful bacteria can grow too numerous, like weeds taking over a lawn, and cause intestinal distress, diarrhea or worse. Probiotics may help restore equilibrium. They're found in foods like yogurt and in dietary supplements that contain various strains of Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium, among others. Here are a few ways these healthy bacteria can help heal you.

Benefits of Healthy Bacteria

Easing diarrhea

Studies show that certain probiotics may shorten the course of infectious diarrhea by 60%.

Preventing infection

Like the gut, the vagina contains bacteria in a dynamic equilibrium, which is one of the reasons women often have vaginal infections after taking antibiotics. Spermicides and birth control pills may also disrupt this ecology. Ingesting certain probiotics could help prevent infections.

Soothing the stomach

Probiotics may help people with irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis.

More benefits

The good bacteria help prevent some allergic reactions. Preliminary research suggests that in children, probiotics reduce the risk of eczema, and animal studies show tumor-preventive action. They even have some

antioxidant properties, which may help fight harmful inflammation.

How to get them

The easiest way is to eat a few servings a week of live-culture yogurt. Supplements are another option, though they vary in quality and potency.

Probiotics cause no serious side effects, but some people notice increased flatulence. Check with your doctor before trying them, especially if you're pregnant or nursing or have a weakened immune system. She can tell you which ones are best for your condition.

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