

Having the guts to be really healthy

Article by Frances Ive, Healthy Soul

When hostile bacteria take over the digestive tract, it is time to take action before problems such as candida set in. The natural answer is probiotics – lately the star of many a yoghurt advertisement. But what are probiotics for and how can they protect our health?

We hear all the time how our modern lifestyles are causing us to suffer from more allergies, minor ailments, skin problems, and unexplained illness such as chronic fatigue syndrome. Every year there are more than a million deaths from food poisoning and much of the reason for all of this is that hostile bacteria take over our gut – the digestive tract, stomach and intestines – and knock out the so-called friendly bacteria which boosts our immune system and helps us to fight disease.

Healthy v hostile bacteria

The gut is like a wild garden with over 400 different species of bacteria weighing some four to five pounds. In a healthy person the ‘friendly’ microflora cling to the wall of the intestinal tract like barnacles preventing harmful bacteria getting a hold. But they are constantly under attack from hostile bacteria that become prevalent when we suffer from stress, take antibiotics or the oral contraceptive, eat poorly, become ill, travel abroad, or drink too much alcohol.

Stress sets off a chain of activities in the body resulting in excess mucus being produced in the gut, which allows the microflora to slide off the wall of the intestinal tract, leaving space for the dangerous bacteria to take over. When we travel overseas we may get a double whammy – added to the stress of getting ready to go away and travelling for hours it’s possible we

might eat food that contains harmful bacteria as well as drinking unsafe local tap water.

Once diarrhoea sets in all the friendly bacteria are completely flushed out and need to be replaced. If antibiotics are prescribed for the upset stomach they kill off pathogens in the gut, but also destroy everything in their path including microflora. Oral contraceptives and steroids have the same effect, so consequently the immune system is weakened and we are left defenceless.

A proliferation of hostile bacteria in the intestinal tract creates the right environment for the yeast, candida albicans, to multiply and take on its fungal form. Candida grows roots which pierce the cell membranes giving it free access to the blood and tissues.

Candida is frequently the source of debilitating symptoms such as irritable bowel syndrome, digestive problems, eczema, exhaustion, cystitis, headaches and migraine. When candida spreads through the intestinal tract into a woman's vagina it becomes thrush.

Boost your immune system

Help is at hand in the form of Probiotics, a word which literally means 'for life' and a word that is slowly creeping into the popular vocabulary mainly due to advertising for yogurts containing probiotic bacteria such as Lactobacillus. (already said in intro)

The generic term, Probiotics covers a number of strains of friendly bacteria which naturally occur in food or can be taken as food supplements. In Sweden a packet of Probiotics is routinely provided alongside a prescription for antibiotics to try to prevent too much damage being done.

Probiotics supplements consist of live microbial cultures which inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria, promote good digestion, boost immune function, stimulate the growth and activity of microflora, and improve the balance of

healthy bacteria in the intestinal tract.

There are a number of friendly bacteria strains which can be found in the gut, some of which are resident and others which pass through without staying. The primary residents are Lactobacillus and Bifidus bacteria, while thermophilus is transient. Most of the organisms create an acid environment which is hostile to harmful bacteria, and they assist in digestion. Lactobacillus acidophilus and bulgaricus also fight the harmful bacteria.

Some manufacturers add Fructo-oligosaccharides (FOS) to their supplements. FOS, which are found in tomatoes, onions, bananas, garlic, wheat, artichokes, leeks, asparagus, and chicory nourishes, encourage the growth of both Bifidobacteria and Lactobacilli in the colon. These are prebiotics which are like 'fertiliser' to encourage the growth of healthy bacteria found in probiotics.

Nutritional advice

Nutritionists and complementary therapists often prescribe probiotics for people with digestive problems who are suffering from excess candida, but to kill off the candida they usually suggest herbal antifungals as well. The analogy of a lawn has been made – before putting down the grass seed it's important to get rid of the weeds!

The number and type of strains which are contained in probiotics varies from one manufacturer to the next although some companies produce a wide range which includes most of the major strains.

There are so many sites in the gut where bacteria can live and one strain cannot populate the entire gut. Different bacteria like different growing conditions and it is important to find a probiotic that contains the bacteria that populate every part of the gut.

Probiotics in the diet

Live yogurt is an excellent source of probiotics but it is necessary to eat a vast

amount every day to equal the amount contained in tablets. Eating live yogurt several times a day is, however, very beneficial and is often recommended by complementary therapists, provided that dairy has not been excluded from the diet. Soya is a good substitute but it's important to check that the yogurt is live.

A note of caution – some of the probiotic products on the market contain sugar too – which is counterproductive for anyone who is suffering from candida. Check the ingredients before buying!

Further reading: The New Optimum Nutrition Bible, by Patrick Holford, published by Piatkus.

The National Candida Society: www.candida-society.org

Xynergy comment: The conventional wisdom is in favour of combining probiotics with prebiotics. Prebiotics are non-digestible foods that make their way through our digestive system and help good bacteria grow and flourish. Prebiotics keep beneficial bacteria healthy.

That's why at Xynergy, we support Nature's Own Probiotic Plus as it contains 9 different probiotic strains, plus a small amount of the prebiotic FOS. This 9-strain product is good for young children and adults up to their early 40s, as the strains are most needed during these years.