

Should you add probiotics to your diet?

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ABSTRACT

It is important to understand the value of probiotics in our diet and to understand the 'food first' approach with naturally fermented food. I remember how my Mom used to serve me homemade yogurt-based sweet dessert called Shrikhand as well as Lassi which I would finish in a fraction of minutes and would not even feel guilty about it! And my granny used to make pickled sweet lemons which when served with khichdi was a soothing delight on any given day! Food does make one nostalgic. Let's take a look at probiotics and understand more about them. Our body is a storehouse of trillions of bacteria. Good and bad ones. When this ratio is imbalanced in our gut, our body becomes more susceptible to infections, digestive disorders, mental problems and inflammation.

A new-born's good bacterial microbiome in the body may suffer if the mother's gut flora is inadequate during pregnancy and birth. This may also affect the baby's health through the various milestones if the gut flora remains inadequate and he is prone to low immunity. Hence, it becomes necessary to nurture our digestive health and strengthen it with lacto fermented food coming in naturally through our diets. While probiotic supplements are widely utilised, many prefer using a "food first" approach by recommending naturally fermented foods.

Key Words: Probiotics; Food; Diet

INTRODUCTION

Probiotics are live bacteria and yeasts that are called "the good" microorganisms because they benefit the body, especially the digestive system. Probiotics, available in some food and dietary supplements, are similar to probiotics that exist naturally in your gut. The most common one is *Acidophilus*. You don't necessarily need probiotic supplements- a type of "good" bacteria - to be healthy. However, these microorganisms may help with digestion and offer protection from harmful bacteria, just as the existing "good" bacteria in your body already do. It is only when the good microbiome count is low, maybe due to the usage of antibiotics which kills the existing good bacteria along with the bad bacteria, we need to supplement it in our diets. The best way to do it is through a diet which has a good number of live cultures and an enhanced nutrition profile in terms of vitamins over their supplemental pills counterparts.

What are prebiotics?

Along with Probiotics, we also need to understand about Prebiotics. Prebiotics are non-digestible carbohydrates that act as food for Probiotics. When Probiotics and Prebiotics combine, they become symbiotic. Fermented dairy products, such as yogurt and kefir, are considered symbiotic because they contain live bacteria and also the fuel they need to thrive upon.

Probiotics are found in food such as yogurt, while Prebiotics are found in whole grains, bananas, onions, garlic, honey and artichokes. In addition, Probiotics and Prebiotics are added to some other foods as well and are available as dietary supplements. Probiotics Health Benefits - While Probiotics and Prebiotics play a role in the digestion and proper absorption of nutrients, this balance is also consequently important to a healthy immune system, good weight control, healthy cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and prevention of diabetes along with many other benefits.

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Although more research is needed, there's encouraging evidence that Probiotics are beneficial in the following conditions

- Treat diarrhoea, especially following treatment with certain antibiotics.
- Prevent and treat vaginal yeast infections and urinary tract infections.
- Treat irritable bowel syndrome.
- Speed treatment of certain intestinal infections.
- Prevent or reduce the severity of colds and flu.

Any side effects?

Side effects are rare, and most healthy adults can safely add food that contain Prebiotics and Probiotics to their diets. If you're considering taking supplements, check with your doctor to be sure that they're right for you.

If you are new to fermented food or probiotics per se, my personal advice will be to start slowly with a smaller amount of a tablespoon to introduce them in your diet and gradually step up the amount. In rare cases, individuals may experience bloating on consumption if the pH of the ferment is too acidic. It is best then to take a break and start with a less fermented version. For these reasons, I prefer to make my own probiotics and fermented food. With experiences of participants in my workshops who start with making their own probiotics, some of them with existing severe acidity or digestive issues take time for their body to get used to it. However, most of them benefit when they are persistent and take them gradually as a therapeutic dose as advised.

How many doses of probiotics should you take? Because there are so many different probiotic organisms, there is no set dosage. Ask your healthcare provider for advice. Some probiotics are dosed by the number of live organisms they contain. For instance, a typical dosage of *Lactobacillus acidophilus* ranges between 1 billion to 10 billion live organisms split into three or four doses. Dosage may also be indicated as Colony Forming Units (CFU).

Fermented food: The strongest probiotic

In order to restore this balance and support a healthy immune response, we suggest that you get reacquainted with the good microbes in your environment. One gentle way to do this is with fermented food.

Fermented food contains Probiotic microbes that feed on the sugars naturally present in food. As bacteria and yeast feed on the sugar content around them, they release enzymes to break down large food particles. This means that fermented food is pre-digested and is also full of enzymes. Pre-digested food contains nutrients that are easy to absorb, which means less work for your stomach and your small intestine. Examples of Fermented Food:

- Yogurt
- Raw fermented vegetables - Kimchi, sauerkraut, pickled vegetables

- Natto, Miso
- Tempeh
- Kvass
- Raw fermented Green Tea (Kombucha)
- Raw dairy kefir
- Coconut water kefir

Raw food has a special therapeutic value in the body because it contains active enzymes which aid in digestion. When raw food undergoes fermentation, it becomes more digestible and acquires greater health benefits to its unfermented versions. For instance, individuals with lactose intolerance are easily able to consume yogurt or kefir (fermented) without any digestive reactions.

Unfortunately, research shows that even when one is in his thirties, the body stops producing the enzymes it needs. In this context, raw and fermented food can actually provide with the enzymes which are all so important for our digestive system.

Fermented food supports the immune system

When you eat fermented food, you actually manage to re-introduce beneficial microbes to the gastrointestinal tract, some of which you may have missed out on during your childhood.

Probiotic-rich food is food which is full of beneficial bacteria and yeast. It synthesises nutrients like biotin, folate, and vitamin K2. These nutrients protect our cells from damage, nourish the brain and support the skeletal system. Good bacteria actively fight harmful bacteria and produces specialised fats that control inflammation.

Fermented Food works wonders for your allergies - Probiotics in fermented food work hand in glove with your immune system. Studies show that the beneficial microbes control outbreaks of allergic hypersensitivity and inflammation.

Our food today is subjected to many unknown additives which affect our health in so many ways. From early signs of inflammation like headaches, constipation, gastric discomfort, lethargy and irritability to name a few, it almost becomes mandatory to take a sneak peek at our diets and evaluate the presence of Probiotics. Even when one is under the impression of consuming Probiotics in some form or the other, the chances still are of the amounts being insufficient. So jazz up your meals with these health supporting elixirs that were passed down to us through ages and may be missing in your diet.