



Probiotics: GOOD germs!

We live in a particularly clean community. Here and there, people reach for their hand sanitizer, and use disinfecting wipes. It is important to be clean and hygienic, to reduce disease caused by harmful bacteria and viruses. But it's also important to remember that we also need so-called "good bacteria" since they help with many of our bodily functions. Scientists are learning more about their benefits all the time.

We probably couldn't survive without bacteria. They line our intestines and help digest food for instance. And while probiotics have been used around the world for preventive and therapeutic purposes, their use in the US has, until recently, been fairly uncommon. Until recently, the use of probiotics has been limited to use by people on the fringes of the medical community and availability limited to alternative and health-food stores.

Probiotics are well-known to prevent or improve diarrhea from antibiotics. And many are aware of how they improve yeast infections, but their benefits seem to extend far beyond this. There's even evidence that giving probiotics results in a better response to vaccines. While there has been a lot of discussion about immunizations in the lay press recently, they are still extremely effective at preventing horrible, deadly, diseases. If someone chooses to give vaccines, they want the child to have a good response to the vaccine...

Probiotics have also been found to prevent eczema. In Finland, investigators gave probiotics to pregnant mothers with a strong family history of allergy in the last month of pregnancy. They continued to give them to the babies for the first few months and these kids went on to have half as many cases of eczema than the other high-risk children.

Although nobody really understands how, giving probiotics to children reduces respiratory infection rates among children in daycare, prevents diarrhea from antibiotics, and will certainly be found to prevent and treat a host of other problems and diseases.

Even infant formula companies are starting to put probiotics and "pre-biotics" - sugars that promote the growth of probiotics -- in their formula.

The future is bright for the use of probiotics and we will certainly learn more about their helpful effects in the coming years.

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