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Overview: The Power of Probiotics

“Friendly” Bacteria Help the Body’s Defenses

A century ago, Russian Nobel Prize winner Eli Metchnikoff took note of the fact that Bulgarians, famous for their longevity, were great yogurt eaters. He wondered if there might be a connection. His subsequent research explored two areas: how cultured milk products (such as yogurt and cultured dairy drinks) could modulate the intestinal microflora in the digestive tract, and a possible correlation between life expectancy and cultured milk consumption. This early research formed the basis for the field of probiotics, launching decades of scientific studies all over the world that continue to uncover many potential health benefits of these beneficial microorganisms.

Probiotics: “Good for Life”

The word “probiotic” literally means “good for life.” In simplest terms, probiotics are “friendly” bacteria that can help keep a healthy balance of bacteria in the intestinal tract, where about 70 percent of the body’s immune system is located.

According to the World Health Organization, probiotics are living microorganisms that, when administered in adequate amounts, confer a health benefit on the host. Those health benefits consist of improving bodily functions such as regularity, detoxification, immune function and digestion.

Good vs. Bad Bacteria: Health in the Balance

More than 400 types of bacteria are found in the human gastrointestinal tract. With a total of about 100 trillion bacterial cells, there are about ten times the number of bacterial cells in the intestinal tract as there are cells in the body. Most of these bacteria are not pathogenic; some are necessary for normal growth and development, while the function of others remains unknown.

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Digestible information on healthy bacteria

The balance of this complex ecosystem of bacteria -- called *intestinal microflora* -- is always subject to change. The types and number of bacteria are influenced by several factors, including: stress (Virkha et al., 1999; Holdeman et al., 1976), antibiotics (Bourlioux et al, 2003), aging (Bertazzoni-Minelli et al., 1993) and diet (Fernandez et al., 1985; Roberfroid, 1996; Bourlioux et al., 2003).

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