

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

As a dental hygienist much of my day involves educating patients about the “bad” bacteria in their mouths and how they can control it. Research has linked the “bad” bacteria in our mouths to systemic diseases like heart and lung disease, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, cancer, arthritis and osteoporosis. Today I wish to convey that not all bacteria are created equal. Today research indicates that Probiotics-Pro meaning “for” or in favor of and biotics meaning “life” -are to the 21st Century what antibiotics meaning “to kill life” was to the 20th Century.

In 2001, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defined probiotics as, “live microorganisms, which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host” Probiotics are friendly beneficial microorganisms; mainly bacteria that work with the body and help maintain the delicate balance between the beneficial flora and the bad bacteria that is necessary for health and wellbeing. When this delicate balance tips to far toward the bad bacteria, which frequently happens, a variety of symptoms and diseases can result from recurring bouts of diarrhea to urinary tract infections to fatigue and muscle pain. To prevent illness as well as treat conditions associated with an imbalance between these types of bacteria more and more health professionals and consumers are turning to probiotics which can be found in supplements and in a variety of foods.

Research suggests that maintaining a healthy balance of bacteria through a diet rich in probiotic foods can increase nutrient viability (your body’s ability to use a nutrient), treat food allergies, suppress tumors, and detoxify carcinogens, help treat the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, improve urogenital health, lower blood cholesterol LDL (low density lipoproteins) and triglycerides, reducing your risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure for people with hypertension, reduce risk of colon or bladder cancer, prevent or treat atopic dermatitis, and treat urinary tract infections and candidacies.

The healthy balance of the digestive tract can be upset by several factors like antibiotic misuse, a high fat diet, a diet high in refined sugars and a high meat diet. Antibiotics can kill friendly bacteria in the gut along with unfriendly bacteria. Some people use probiotics to offset side effects from antibiotics like gas, cramping, or diarrhea. Other unfriendly microorganisms such as disease causing bacteria, yeast, fungi and parasites can also upset the balance. Researchers are exploring whether probiotics can halt or suppress their growth and activity in conditions like irritable bowel syndrome, infections with helicobacter pyloris, tooth decay and periodontal disease, vaginal infections, stomach and respiratory infections and skin infections.

Scientists think probiotics work by the good bacteria replacing or crowding out the bad bacteria in the intestinal tract. Another theory is that the good bacteria keep the intestinal tract acidic where the bad bacteria can't survive. Our digestive tracts are lined with more than 400 different kinds of good bacteria that help fight off infections and keep us healthy. By consuming foods with probiotics you can increase the number of good bacteria, boost your immunity, and promote a healthy digestive system. Probiotics are not new; people have been consuming them for centuries through fermented foods and cultured milk products. Today commercial products usually contain one or more of these three bacterial groups, Lactobacillus, Bifidobacterium spp. And Streptococcus thermophilus. Yogurt is an excellent source of probiotics but only the products that say "live and active culture" on the labels. Within the live and active culture yogurts some products contain significantly more bacteria than others. Yogurt is an excellent snack and is a nutritional powerhouse containing an excellent source of protein and calcium. It is best to choose yogurts that are live and active cultures that are low fat or nonfat, and pay attention to expiration dates as live cultures diminish with time. If any side effects occur they seem to be mild such as bloating or gas. You should always consult with your health care provider first and you should not use probiotics in place of conventional medical care or the delay in seeking that care.

Ellen Zanichelli, RDH, BS is an independent dental hygienist and owner of Zanichelli Dental Hygiene, PC., formally La Plaza Dental Hygiene, PC. She is pleased to announce she is relocating her practice to Evergreen Terraces, 4611 Plettner Lane, suite 120, overlooking beautiful Evergreen Lake. With her new location handicapped access is facilitated with undercover parking and an elevator to the lobby.