

Probiotics/yogurt are guardians of health

Written by PHILIP S. CHUA, M.D., FACS, FPCS
Friday, 23 September 2011 16:23



PROBIOTICS are live microorganisms which, when ingested, confer a health benefits.

The most common types of microbes used as probiotics are lactic acid bacteria (LAB) and bifidobacteria, but some yeasts and bacilli may also provide good physiologic effects.

Fermented foods with added active live cultures, like yogurt, soy yogurt, or certain dietary supplements are available in most grocery stores.

What is *Lacobacillus acidophilus*?

L. acidophilus is the most popularly used probiotic or “friendly bacteria.”

They live in the intestines and vagina and prevent the entrance and proliferation of disease-causing organisms, thus protecting the individual.

Are there other friendly bacteria in our body?

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Yes.

Actually there are several trillion friendly bacteria (over 400 species) in the human gastrointestinal tract.

Literally, we carry about four pounds (1.8 kilos) of microbacteria in our guts.

A healthy predominance of the good bacteria over the bad bacteria spells well-being for the person.

If the bad or pathogenic bacteria “outnumber” the friendly ones, ill-health occurs.

How does *L. acidophilus* work?

There are a variety of mechanisms through which *L. acidophilus* accomplish its good job.

Example: the breakdown of food by this probiotic results in the production of lactic acid, hydrogen peroxide and a few other by-products that create a hostile environment for the bad bacteria.

Lactase, the enzyme that breaks down lactose (milk sugar) into simple sugars, for proper digestion and absorption, is produced by *L. acidophilus* too.

Those with lactose intolerance or lactase deficiency may be helped by *L. acidophilus*.

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Who develops lactase deficiency?

While it is possible that some people could be born with lactase deficiency state, most of those with lactose intolerance (lactase deficiency) develop the condition secondary to lifestyle.

People who, during childhood, do not drink milk or do not eat dairy products regularly, acquire lactase deficiency.

Lack of this enzyme prevents milk and dairy products (cheese, ice cream, even beans) from being digested and absorbed and properly.

This leads to what is known as lactose intolerance, where the milk sugar (lactose) is not effectively broken down to simple sugars, a process needed for proper digestion.

How prevalent is lactase deficiency?

To some degree or another lactase deficiency is found in 75 percent of adults worldwide.

Among Chinese, it is 100 percent.

Twenty five percent of the U.S. population has some degree of lactose intolerance.

About 90 percent of Asian-Americans, 80 percent of Afro-Americans, 53 percent of Mexican-Americans, about 80 percent of Native-Americans (American Indians), and 15 percent of Caucasians suffer from lactose intolerance of varying degrees.

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The incidence for southern Italians and Ashkenazi Jews, 70 percent.

A high prevalence is also reported among the majority of Mediterranean Arabs.

Exception includes northwest Europeans, where the incidence is below said to be 20 percent.

It has been postulated that those with lactose-intolerance also have a higher risk of stroke, colon cancer, hypertension, osteoporosis.

Whether decreased calcium intake (as a result of lactase deficiency) is a predisposing factor in the development of these disease is still not known.

What are the symptoms of lactose intolerance?

Diarrhea and abdominal discomfort/distention, nausea, bloating, passing a lot of flatus, intestinal cramps following ingestion of lactose-containing food items, like ice cream, cheese, even salad or beans.

Children who have lactase deficiency will fail to gain weight.

The symptoms of lactose intolerance could be mild to severe, depending on the degree of lactase deficiency.

Are there pills for those with lactose intolerance?

Yes.

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One popular brand in the U.S. is Lactaid, an over-the-counter medication that has really been effective for those individuals with lactase deficiency.

Taking this pill allows them to drink milk and eat dairy products in moderation.

Is it effective for bacterial vaginal infection, diarrhea?

L. acidophilus, when taken by mouth (like yogurt) or as a vaginal douche, tablet or suppository, has been proven effective in treating vaginal infections caused by bacteria.

For acute diarrhea due to rotavirus, antibiotic associated diarrhea, travelers' diarrhea, chronic or recurrent diarrhea, *Helicobacter pylori* stomach ulcer and irritable bowel syndrome, this "friendly bacteria" appear to be of help.

Is *L. acidophilus* safe?

As aptly reported by Natural Standard in cooperation with Harvard Medical School, "there is limited scientific evidence about the safety and effectiveness of *L. acidophilus* in humans."

There were reports of lactobacillus septicemia (blood poisoning infection) among people who were very ill or those with lowered immune system to begin with. Before taking any lactobacillus preparation, consult with your physician.

Is eating yogurt safer, healthier?

Yes, safer and healthier than taking *L. acidophilus*, or eating ice cream, cakes or drinking pop

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beverages (the cola and non-cola drinks) that are full of sugars, loaded with carbohydrate that leads to weight gain fast.

Yogurt, also spelled yogourt or yoghurt, is a semi-solid fermented milk product which originated in Bulgaria centuries ago.

In the United States, the starter culture for the production of most yogurt is a symbiotic blend of *Streptococcus salivaris* subsp. *thermophilus* (ST) and *Lactobacillus delbrueckii* subsp. *Bulgaricus* (LB).

This produces the best, most stable and safest combination.

Eating yogurt daily has been proven for centuries to be safe and healthy.

Since yogurt contains the enzyme lactase, it is easily tolerated by lactose intolerant people.

Wouldn't eating yogurt confer the same benefits?

Yes, eating yogurt, which is a health food acclaimed the world over, provides the same benefits, and perhaps more, than taking the commercially marketed lactobacillus preparations.

Moreover, yogurt has been tested for centuries to be safe and healthy.

Dieters around the globe consume yogurt with passion.

It also comes in various flavors today, eaten by millions as a part of a healthy lifestyle.

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