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## **Friendly Bacteria – A Must for Good Health**

A health component that is often ignored and very much misunderstood is the value of friendly bacteria towards optimal health. We know about antibiotics, medicines that kill bacteria, but some bacteria must be present for our bodies to function properly. These bacteria, when taken as a supplement are known as probiotics. Natural health practitioners have known about these little critters for years and thankfully, this knowledge is beginning to creep into the medical profession.

Several hundred different strains of friendly bacteria inhabit our bodies. They live on our skin, in our mouth, esophagus, stomach, intestines, vagina, and anus. We are not born with these bacteria but we acquire them through the birthing process as well as through breast milk which contains a prebiotic that helps Bifidobacteria grow in the colon. As we grow we continue to acquire both friendly and unfriendly bacteria from our food, water, soil, and air.

Good bacteria have many important jobs. They are helpful to our immune system by increasing the antibodies we need to destroy harmful chemicals and organisms that cause infections and disease. They eliminate cancer-causing compounds and support spleen and thymus function – key components of our immune system. They also help with the production of natural antibiotics such as acidophillin, bifidin, and hydrogen peroxide. They produce the products that help fight the growth of “bad” bacteria such as Salmonella, Shigella and E. Coli and make it difficult for fungus and yeast cells to grow out of control.

Many of us have problems with diarrhea and/or constipation. Adding friendly bacteria can help our bodies break down the food we eat making it easier for wastes to pass through the intestines while improving the absorption of nutrients. For those days when we have problems with intestinal bloating and gas, the inclusion of friendly bacteria will stop harmful bacteria from producing foul-smelling waste and painful intestinal gas and bloating.

Friendly bacteria help regulate and balance hormone levels which can improve prostate health and reduce hair loss. They can also reduce or eliminate problems with PMS, osteoporosis, water-retention, and migraine headaches. They play a role in cholesterol management as well by reducing cholesterol accumulation in our blood and excreting it through our bowel. Without the work of these bacteria, dangerous levels of cholesterol can form in our blood.

The bacteria in our intestines help create Vitamin K which is necessary for normal blood clotting and bone health, plus a number of B vitamins, which are very helpful in stress management, proper cell growth, and the conversion of food to energy. These bacteria

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also help our bodies produce lactase, an enzyme necessary for the breakdown of milk products.

Now that we see the value of maintaining a healthy amount of friendly bacteria we have to acknowledge that most of us are lacking them. There are many reasons for this lack including antibiotic and steroid use, inhaled asthma medicines, chlorine in our drinking water, birth control pills and other hormonal treatments, antacid use, stress, radiation, chemotherapy, and of course a diet filled with sugar and refined carbohydrates.

Let's be clear about antibiotic use. Antibiotics kill friendly as well as unfriendly bacteria. Although there are times when antibiotics are absolutely necessary we should be very selective about when they are called for. If we must take an antibiotic we should supplement with a probiotic during and for as long as three months after the treatment to restore our friendly bacteria to optimum levels. Likewise, although sometimes necessary, steroids such as Prednisone and inhaled asthma drugs destroy friendly bacteria.

There's mounting clinical evidence of the value of probiotics. For instance, when it comes to sinus infections, a common reason for antibiotic and steroid use, research published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in February 2003, indicated that regular intake of probiotics can reduce potentially pathogenic (disease causing) bacteria in the upper respiratory tract.

Probiotics have been shown to be quite helpful in the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome. In one study alone an improvement in symptoms was noted in 95 percent of patients. In another study they were found to reduce symptoms of bloating, abdominal pain and bowel movement difficulty as well as reducing inflammation.

Studies in Britain have further shown that children with recurrent ear infections who were given a probiotic had half as many recurring ear infections as those in the control group. As a matter of fact, researchers in pediatric medicine stated in the April 2005 issue of *Current Opinion in Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, that "probiotics may be an important complementary approach in the treatment and the natural and long-term course of various pediatric diseases."

Given the mounting evidence about the role and effectiveness of friendly bacteria, it may be time to consider adding them to our daily routine. This can be accomplished by eating good quality yogurt with active cultures to obtain a couple of the strains or by taking a probiotic supplement that contains many strains.

*BIO:*

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