

Probiotics: Do They Offer Health Benefits?

Generally, I don't watch much TV. The other day, though, I noted frequent ads advertising a new yogurt product that promotes better bowel health. I decided to investigate what was so new about this product over other yogurt products with live bacteria cultures present in them.

The term "probiotics" refers to dietary supplements or foods that contain beneficial or "good" bacteria normally found in your body. Although you don't need probiotics to be healthy, these microorganisms may assist with digestion or help protect against some harmful bacteria. There is growing interest in probiotics and researchers are studying whether probiotics taken as foods or supplements can help treat or prevent illness.

Most often we are encouraged to eat yogurt to treat diarrhea during or following a course of antibiotic therapy or vaginal yeast infections. Some studies have found yogurt (containing probiotics) to be useful in managing the signs and symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. This is where the TV ad comes into play. Instead of using the active *lactobacillus* culture, it uses a *bifidobacterium* culture. This bacteria is reported to help regulate long transit time of stool through the bowel. (Always check with your doctor before starting any new treatment regimen.)

Here are some of the possible health benefits of having a yogurt (six ounce serving of any type) a day.

- Yogurt may help prevent osteoporosis when used in your total intake of calcium and vitamin D. Find out which brands have added vitamin D by reading labels when you shop.
- Yogurt with active cultures helps the gut. Yogurt with active cultures may help people with lactose intolerance, constipation, diarrhea, irritable bowel disease, and *H. pylori* infections. (*H. pylori* is a bacteria that can contribute to ulcers.)
- Yogurt with active cultures may discourage vaginal infections due to yeast infections.

When buying yogurt, these are other considerations to think about besides the probiotics. Do you want regular fat, low fat, or fat free yogurt? The other decision is do you want added calories from ordinary sugar or high fructose corn syrup, or artificial sweeteners (found mostly in the "light" brands.) Also, textures and flavors vary with brands; experiment until you find one that you like. Always make sure that the label states that there are "live and active cultures" present in the product that you purchase.

Adults and children can reap the benefits of yogurt. Besides eating it "straight" from the container, try using yogurt as a substitute for salad dressings (good on a fruit salad) or in cooking. Adding a tablespoon of ground flax seed to your serving of yogurt will increase the fiber content and plant based omega 3 oils to help with cholesterol reduction.