



The Good For You GERMS

By Sharon Salomon, MS, RD

The guy in front of me on the line at the Southwest security gate smirked as I placed my plastic bag full of 3-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer on the conveyor belt.

"You're one of those germophobes," he snickered.

I admit that I'm scared of bacteria—the kinds that cause skin rashes and sore throats and especially the ones that make my GI tract scream for help. So I carry sanitizer with me wherever I go, wash my produce and smear ointment on wounds to keep the little buggers away. Maybe I'm being a bit hasty trying to rid myself of all bacteria, though. It seems that some of them are friendly, even beneficial, and those are the ones I should be trying to nurture.

Those friendly germs inhabit my digestive tract along with the unfriendly ones. In fact, we have about 400 different species of bacteria in our guts all the time.

When the balance of friendly to unfriendly is out of whack, we are vulnerable to all sorts of diseases. It's the friendly bacteria that keep the unfriendly, disease-causing bacteria in check. According to Tim Hawkins, LMT, CNMT, NCBTMB, President of Windhawk in Mesa, modern lifestyle can mess with the balance and leave us susceptible to injury and disease. "Stress leads to the death of friendly bacteria, the stress of life, work, and even the stress of athletic training can disrupt the balance of good to bad bacteria," he says. "Antibiotics and other medications also negatively impact the good bacteria."

Eating the right foods, drinking enough water, getting adequate sleep, and reducing life stressors all help to keep friendly bacteria plentiful. Making sure we have enough

of the good germs to keep the bad ones at bay may require a bit more than just good living. That's where probiotics and prebiotics come in. Probiotics, found in foods like yogurt and supplements, are live beneficial bacteria that promote gastrointestinal health and immunity. Prebiotics are nondigestible food substances called oligosaccharides that encourage the growth of probiotic bacteria. Getting enough of both prebiotics and probiotics will help to ensure that the friendly bacteria thrive. In addition to keeping the disease causing bacteria down, friendly bacteria also synthesize vitamins B12, biotin, and vitamin K, degrade toxins, and stimulate the immune system.

Foods like yogurt with live cultures, kefir (a fermented dairy beverage), sauerkraut, buttermilk, tempeh and miso all contain probiotic organisms. But these foods might not provide enough live bacteria to guarantee that delicate balance. Enter probiotic and symbiotic (combinations of probiotic bacteria and prebiotic ingredients) supplements. Probiotic supplements are sold as powders, liquids or pills. They may be refrigerated or shelved near digestive enzyme supplements.

Hawkins recommends looking for a brand that is refrigerated and supplies many different forms of colonizing bacteria, numbering in the billions. He prefers the pills over liquids and powders. "Stay away from products that contain magnesium stearate as a flowing agent," says Hawkins.

Sports dietitian Marjorie Geiser, RD, NSCA-CPT, suggests consumers

read the label to make sure that the supplement provides billions of live organisms from both *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* species. To be effective, the bacteria have to reach the gut unscathed and in sufficient numbers after traversing the acid environment of the stomach and then they have to remain viable floating in the digestive enzymes of the intestine. For this reason, Hawkins recommends a stabilized product.

Both Hawkins and Geiser counsel people to start slowly when adding probiotic supplements. Although side effects in otherwise healthy people are rare, the bacteria can cause gas and bloating if their numbers increase too rapidly. It's best to take them in the morning before a meal or between meals when stomach acid and digestive enzymes are low to keep the bacteria safe from the harsh environment of the GI tract. The best way to know if the supplement is working for you is evaluating how you feel after a few weeks of using the product.

If you feel queasy after an intense workout, try eating foods with live bacteria like yogurt and adding a probiotic supplement to your daily routine. Give it a few weeks and see if your GI symptoms decrease. "Probiotics have worked for my clients who suffer from reflux that results from heavy training. People should not expect instant results. It takes a while for the bacteria to colonize and flourish," says Geiser.

Research in the field is ongoing. According to one of the foremost experts on probiotics, Mary Ellen Sanders, PhD, the hypothesized

benefits are numerous. Some of the proposed health benefits include:

- Promoting urinary and genital health
- Promoting immune function
- Increasing resistance to pathogens, infection and inflammation
- Synthesizing vitamins (niacin, folic acid, biotin and B6)
- Enhancing nutrient bioavailability
- Alleviating symptoms of lactose intolerance
- Managing skin allergies
- Reducing serum cholesterol levels
- Decreasing the risk of certain cancers
- Reducing the incidence of periodontal disease
- Reducing the incidence of ulcers caused by *H. pylori* bacteria
- Managing irritable bowel syndrome

The health benefits are strain specific so take a supplement that offers many different bacterial species of *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*. Look for a brand that guarantees the number of live organisms and lists an expiration date on the label. Keep in mind that moisture, temperature and light can affect the viability of the bacteria so keep the bottle tightly closed in the refrigerator at all times to maintain potency. Help the friendly little bacteria colonize and grow in your gut by eating lots of fruits and vegetables and unprocessed whole grains because those provide nutrients that "feed" the bacteria.

Lastly, be sure to notify your health-care provider if you are taking probiotics. And remember, they are an adjunct to medical care, not a substitute. ■