

There's a Microbe in My Dish!

But don't complain to the waiter just yet! Nurturing the bacteria in your body may be the key to improving your overall health and extending life expectancy.

BY ANNE MARIE O'CONNOR

It wasn't that long ago that the only good bacteria was a dead bacteria. But as it turns out, the microbes in our gut are essential to good health. "According to current research, it appears that the majority of our life-sustaining functions are influenced by our gut," says Jo Ann Hattner, RDN, MPH, author of *Gut Insight: Probiotics and Prebiotics for Digestive Health and Well-Being*.

Not only can our digestive system be negatively affected by an imbalance of gut bacteria, causing diarrhea and constipation, but it's also a major source of inflammation, which can affect your cardiovascular system, joints, skin and even oral health. Experts believe that many chronic diseases, such as Alzheimer's, asthma, cancer and cardiovascular disease—which are major causes of death across the world—are

Should I take a probiotic supplement?

Probiotic supplements can be a handy alternative to eating fermented foods like yogurt, kimchee and sauerkraut. Here's what you should keep in mind.

They are potentially beneficial. "Supplements might add some bacteria to your gut," says Jo Ann Hattner, RDN, MPH. "I've seen people with constipation and/or diarrhea respond to them, but it's very individual."

What works for one person might not work for you. Hattner recommends you review, with your health professional, the 2019 edition of the *Clinical Guide to Probiotic Products*, found at usprobioticguide.com. It lists indications, dosage formats and clinical studies. She further recommends you discuss with your doctor whether a probiotic is appropriate and safe for you.

the result of a microbiome imbalance.

Your diet can have a profound effect on the diversity and number of beneficial microflora in your gut. Here are the keys to making sure the good guys get the upper hand:

EAT A DIVERSE DIET

Consuming a wide range of whole-plant foods—like fruits, veggies, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds—is the smartest strategy for increasing diversity in the microbiome, Hattner says.

INCLUDE FERMENTED FOODS

Foods that contain live active cultures, such as yogurt and kefir, are beneficial to the live organisms in your gut, she says. "We should eat these every few days." In addition, "other fermented foods, such as sauerkraut, kimchee, miso and kombucha, may contain live microorganisms that contribute to the good bacteria in your gut, but their content depends on preparation." (Heat and improper handling can kill them.)

"Kefir and yogurt, which contain live active cultures, are my favorite choices," continues Hattner. She recommends buying plain versions and adding your own fruit or maple syrup. "Additives may interfere with the bacteria," she notes. (She also points out that the lactose in the milk has been fermented by bacteria, so people with lactose intolerance can often consume yogurt and kefir.)

FEED THE BACTERIA

"Bacteria have to eat, too," says Hattner. Prebiotic foods "provide nourishment for bacteria. Prebiotic fiber sources are foods that are known to support the growth of the beneficial microflora, particularly the bifidobacteria." Hattner's website, gutinsight.com, has a complete list of prebiotic foods. Some common ones are apples, bananas, berries, onions, garlic, asparagus, tomatoes, mushrooms, greens, lentils, beans, peas, whole wheat, brown rice, corn, oats, almonds and honey.

Kimchee, a spicy fermented cabbage, gives you the health benefits of both a probiotic food and a cruciferous vegetable.

A NEW PROBIOTIC FOOD

Brooklyn, New York-based microbiologist and NYrture Food founder Ann Yonetani, Ph.D., is on a mission to introduce Americans to nattō, an ancient Japanese fermented food. Her version, which she's dubbed New York Natto, is made with soybeans fermented with *Bacillus subtilis*, a bacterial species not found in most probiotic foods and one that boosts the growth of other beneficial microbes and inhibits potentially harmful ones, she says. It's also an excellent source of protein, fiber, and vitamins B2 and K2. To order, go to nyrture.com.

—Donna Bulseco