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All Consuming: Probiotics give boost to digestive, immune systems

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Posted: 7:20 p.m. Friday, April 23, 2010

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You've probably seen the advertisements for Activia, the Dannon brand yogurt that contains probiotics. With actress Jamie Lee Curtis as its spokeswoman, the ads claim it can help "get your digestive system back on track." I had not paid much attention except to the annoying singing of the word "Activia," until a 24-pack of the tasty yogurt turned up in my own refrigerator.

So, I decided to find out what probiotics are, and what's behind the hype.

"They're friendly bacteria," said Ginny Erwin, Boca Raton-based registered dietitian. "Inside our gut are tiny colonies of trillions of bacteria. Though some bacteria are harmful, we have good bacteria to help keep the bad bacteria down. The good bacteria help keep our immune system functioning at a high level."

Erwin said she recommends probiotics, especially for people with irritable bowel syndrome, those who take antibiotics on a regular basis, and also for people who travel and eat out a lot.

In fact, probiotics, available in certain foods as well as in supplements, are big business. For the year ended March 20, products with a "probiotic" health and wellness claim accounted for \$1.26 billion in sales at U.S. supermarkets, up 7.3 percent from the previous year, according to The Nielsen Co. These figures include food, beverages and over-the-counter supplements.

The trend is so hot, probiotics are being included in everything from chocolates to such beverages as Bigelow lemon ginger herb tea and the Good Belly fruit drinks. Mintel International Group reports that in the past two years, 180 new products containing probiotics have hit the stores, and 99 are spoonable yogurts.

Although probiotics have been popular in Europe for years, it wasn't until the 2006 launch of Activia that they began to catch on here.

Expect to see more products, such as probiotic chewing gum and candies that might help prevent tooth decay and gum disease. Probiotics are naturally occurring in foods such as miso soup, aged cheese and sauerkraut.

Do they work? Yes, there's data to prove the benefits as far as digestive difficulties go, said Dr. Cynthia Yoshida, a Charlottesville, Va.-based gastroenterologist and author of No More Digestive Problems.

"A number of different studies have come out showing that probiotics improve irritable bowel syndrome and symptoms such as bloating and discomfort," Yoshida said.

Probiotics are also available as dietary supplements, but Yoshida cautions that the majority of the over-the-counter products contain dead bacteria, which do nothing. Ask your doctor before taking supplements.

"Eating yogurt is a dietary means to improve some of your symptoms. Will it make you suddenly feel younger? No. If you have some of these symptoms, using probiotics may be useful. There is nothing harmful in it," Yoshida said.

However, three or four 4-ounce containers of yogurt a day must be consumed to affect digestive problems, she said. Activia's Web site states that one serving a day is recommended, but acknowledges that studies showed results were better when participants consumed up to three 125-gram portions a day. That's more than three of the 4-ounce

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containers.

It takes two weeks for any effects to show up.

As for probiotics' other possible positive effects in areas such as heart disease, obesity and cancer, more research is needed.

" Overall, people can benefit from adding yogurt or probiotics to their daily diet," Erwin said.

For more information, go to the International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics at www.usprobiotics.org.

~ susan_salisbury@pbpost.com

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN BUYING PROBIOTICS

When buying a supplement, look for the GMP (good manufacturing seal) and USP (United States Pharmacopoeia) seal, advises registered dietitian Ginny Erwin.

When buying yogurt, look for the 'Live & Active Cultures' seal developed by the National Yogurt Association to identify those yogurts containing significant levels of such cultures. The seal is a voluntary identification available to all manufacturers of refrigerated yogurt whose products contain at least 100 million cultures per gram at the time of manufacture. That's 20 billion per 8-ounce serving. The seal also is available to manufacturers of frozen yogurt.

Since the program is voluntary, some yogurt products may contain live cultures but not carry the seal. Check the label for indications that the yogurt contains live cultures. But without the seal, there is no unbiased validation of the level of live cultures present in the product.

Source: National Yogurt Association, www.aboutyogurt.com

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