

May 25: Probiotics and Prebiotics

Probiotics and prebiotics have been a topic of discussion and research in regards to their influence to treatment and prevention of certain infectious diseases, metabolic conditions, immune disorders and neurological disorders. You've probably heard the terms, but do you know the difference?

Probiotics are live, active microorganisms ingested to alter the gastrointestinal flora for health benefits. They are often referred to as “good” bacteria in the gut. These organisms compete with “bad” bacteria for places to stick and stay within the gut. They work to either get rid of pathogens or help to boost a person’s immune system. The benefits of probiotics were first noticed as people started eating fermented foods. Fermented foods contain probiotics and examples of these foods are: fermented vegetables, sauerkraut, miso, fermented cheese, kefir, yogurt, tempeh, pickles, kimchi, green olives, wine, natto, and sourdough bread. In addition to food, probiotics are also available in supplements and some food manufacturers have started adding probiotics to other items like water, chips, and juice.

There are hundreds of species of probiotics with even higher numbers of strains within the species. Various strains provide different functions or different benefits in the body. Function can vary even more whether probiotics are used independently or with others.

Prebiotics are nutrients that benefit probiotics. They are basically food that fuels and grows the good bacteria (probiotics) in the gut. These food components cannot be broken down by our digestive systems and have to be fermented by our gut bacteria. Prebiotics are actually found in a wide variety of foods including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds. Asparagus, artichokes, garlic, onions, leeks, bananas, almonds, oatmeal, wheat, legumes, soybeans, and honey are especially high in prebiotics. The more of these foods you can incorporate into your routine, the higher number of probiotic strains will be supported. The higher the variety in prebiotics, the better support to your microbiome diversity. One cautionary recommendation is that the foods high in prebiotics are often those that contain increased fiber. We benefit from fiber in our diets but if too much fiber is added too quickly into your diet, you may experience gas, bloating, or stomach ache. Slowly increase your consumption of these foods to reduce your risk of uncomfortable symptoms.

We have all heard, “you are what you eat”, this is true for bacteria too!