

A question of culture

Are probiotics okay if you're HIV-positive?

by Bijal Thoda

Many of us eat yogurt because we've heard it's good for us. Yogurt contains probiotics, live microorganisms known as friendly or good bacteria, since they're similar to the ones naturally found in your gut. Some studies indicate that probiotics can help treat diarrhea, Crohn's disease, and irritable bowel syndrome. Can it also help people with HIV/AIDS to ease the suffering from diarrhea and nausea?

Probiotics typically contain two groups of bacteria, *Lactobacillus* and *bifidobacterium*. Within each group, there are different species—for example, *Lactobacillus acidophilus*—and within each species, different strains or varieties. Probiotics could also contain yeasts, which are different from bacteria. Probiotics are available as dietary supplements such as powders, capsules, liquids, as well as in such foods as fermented or cultured yogurt, miso, and fermented drinks.

Though friendly bacteria have been around forever, the recent interest in probiotics for health purposes is because friendly bacteria that naturally exist in our body are vital to proper development of your immune system and to the digestion and absorption of food and nutrients. Friendly bacteria also protect against microorganisms that could cause disease by simply consuming the same resources that disease-causing bacteria would need to survive.

Each person's balance of bacteria varies, and can be crucial to your health and well-being. This balance can be broken by antibiotics, which don't differentiate friendly bacteria from the disease-causing ones, and attack them all. Unfriendly microorganisms such as disease-causing bacteria, yeasts, fungi, and parasites can also upset the balance.

Probiotics can have potential side effects, though the side effects tend to be mild digestive problems, such as gas or bloating. People with underlying health conditions could potentially experience more serious side effects. However, the safety of probiotics hasn't been thoroughly investigated. In particular, more research is needed on how safe probiotics are for young children, elderly people, and people with compromised immune systems.

Researchers are studying the effects of probiotics on conditions such as infectious diarrhea, irritable bowel

syndrome, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, *Helicobacter pylori*, and other chronic inflammatory conditions of the gut, respiratory/urinary system, and skin. Investigators are exploring whether probiotics can halt these unfriendly invaders in the first place, and/or suppress their growth and activity.

And while some HIV-positive people have used probiotics successfully to treat unexplained or drug-induced diarrhea, there's little scientific evidence to indicate that probiotics can help prevent diarrhea-causing infections or diarrhea due to HIV medications among PWAs.

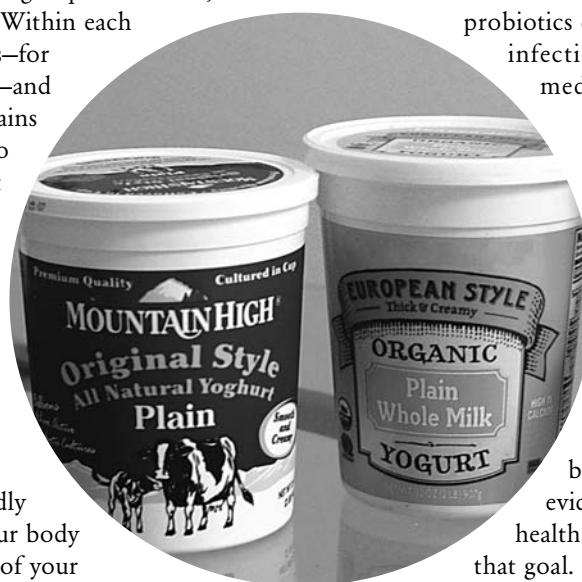
One issue is that probiotic dietary supplements are manufactured and regulated as food, not drugs.

Much more scientific knowledge is needed to understand their safety and appropriate use. Side effects can be different for various strains of probiotics, and even for different preparations of the same strain. And finally, though it may be good to have healthy bacteria in your colon, there's little evidence that buying probiotics at the health food store will help you achieve that goal.

So is all this disheartening news? Maybe not. In theory, probiotics can help all PWAs, regardless of your viral load or CD4 level. However, the dosage would vary: if you have a low CD4 count, start with a low dose of probiotics to build up in your body.

Because probiotics consist of beneficial bacteria, theoretically they shouldn't have any detrimental effect if you have a low CD4 count. In fact, probiotics could benefit someone with a low CD4 count, since they increase the level of immunoglobulin in the gastrointestinal tract. These molecules stimulate B cell and T cell production.

The key, then, is sticking to low dosages of probiotics. And get assessed by your doctor. ⊕



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