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“Probiotics and Prebiotics”

The health of your gut plays a fundamental role in your overall well-being. Although often overlooked, the gut influences far more than digestion; it impacts immune function, obesity, and chronic disease. Your gut microbiome is home to trillions of microorganisms that work together to maintain balance, or homeostasis, in your gastrointestinal tract. When this balance is disrupted, a condition known as dysbiosis can contribute to a range of health issues.

Probiotics are living microorganisms found naturally in fermented foods and beverages. While fermentation has been used for thousands of years to preserve foods, these products have recently gained attention for their potential health benefits. Research has shown that probiotics may support healthy immune function, support a healthy balance of gut microorganisms, and be used for the prevention or treatment of certain illnesses and diseases.

Common probiotic-rich foods include sauerkraut, sourdough, yogurt, kimchi, kefir, kombucha, and miso. Ongoing research is exploring which probiotic strains have the greatest health benefits and how processing, such as baking sourdough, affects the survival of these microorganisms. It's important to note that only live microorganisms provide probiotic benefits. Those destroyed during processing do not. Additionally, probiotic supplements are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), so there's no guarantee the microorganisms remain alive or effective by the time they reach consumers. As a consumer, it is important to research and talk with your healthcare provider about taking probiotics as a dietary supplement before consuming.

While probiotics introduce beneficial bacteria, prebiotics feed the healthy bacteria already in your gut. Prebiotics are found naturally in many fiber-rich foods and are essential for maintaining a balanced microbiome. Good sources include fruits (such as apples and blueberries), vegetables (like asparagus and leafy greens), nuts, seeds, legumes, and whole grains. Other forms of prebiotics include psyllium, resistant starch, fructooligosaccharides (FOS), and inulin. All prebiotics are dietary fibers, but not all fibers are prebiotics. Many food companies now market products as “high in fiber” or “containing prebiotics”. Products include breakfast bars, cereal, snacks, and soda alternatives. While these can add fiber to your diet, it's important to check the nutrition facts label for added sugar, sodium, and saturated fats, which are common in processed foods. Prebiotics are generally tolerated well by the gastrointestinal tract, but excess consumption may lead to gas, bloating, abdominal cramping, or diarrhea.

Probiotics and prebiotics work hand-in-hand to support gut health. Probiotics add beneficial bacteria, while prebiotics nourish them. Together, they can promote a thriving microbiome supporting digestion, immunity, and overall well-being.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.