



October 16, 2010 – Georgetown, SC

Bacteria and Immune Health

In a recent editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, a physician speculated on how the bacteria in your gut act as one of your immune system's first lines of defense (1). Dr. Achim Hoerauf suggested that whatever compromises the colony of bacteria in your gut compromises your immune system. He talked about a research article in the issue, but that's not critical to the message for physicians: do what you can to protect the bacteria in your patients' guts to keep their immune systems working properly.

Dr. Hoerauf suggested that medications such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) can reduce the bacterial flora with regular use. But foods that have peptides with antimicrobial properties added as preservatives can also damage the gut bacteria. While not everyone takes NSAIDs, everyone eats. The more processed and refined food we eat, the more the gut bacteria can be damaged, and thus the more the immune system can be compromised. While he was talking about patients getting ready for surgery, this problem also has bearing in our everyday lives.

All of us eat processed foods that contain some of these types of preservatives. We could simply stop eating foods with preservatives and prepare whole, fresh foods at every meal, but I don't think that's going to happen any time soon--we don't have the time. What I think is possible and reasonable is to take a probiotic every day with several strains of bacteria; not just once in a while but every day. We have convenience, but it comes with a price. If the cost is replacing good bacteria every day, it's a trade-off that I think is worth it. Eat fresh when you can but when you can't, offset any negative effects by taking your probiotic every day.

Gunning Wooden Boats

Today Paula and I are in South Carolina helping our son Matthew and his wife Kerri show their boats at the Georgetown Wooden Boat Show. If you live in the area, stop by and meet the family. Oh, and because boats are not my specialty--I'm just there as eye candy--if you have questions about health, I'll be glad to answer them as well. But you have to see Matthew's boats. You've never seen anything like them; get a preview at his Facebook page.

What are you prepared to do today?™

Dr. Chet

Reference: N Engl J Med 363;15-16

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