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Probiotics and Ulcers

Probiotics are bacteria that are beneficial for the health of our digestive system. When humans ate a diet closer to nature, we got them from the plant foods we ate. Today with processed foods so prevalent, it's much more difficult to get probiotics from foods. Our options are yogurt and yogurt-based drinks or a probiotic supplement; we just don't eat enough vegetables and fruit. This lack of good bacteria may contribute to a whole host of digestive issues from constipation to ulcers.

Probiotics are being researched for a variety of digestive conditions with mixed results. Two recently published studies on the use of probiotics with traditional ulcer treatment illustrate how mixed results may happen. It all comes down to the questions you ask.

Study 1

Researchers in Portugal recruited 62 consecutive ulcer patients who had untreated ulcers with high levels of *H. pylori* bacteria (1). The first 31 patients received traditional treatment with a triple-antibiotic pharmaceutical. The second 31 patients received the same traditional antibiotic treatment plus a probiotic; treatment lasted eight days for both groups. The researchers examined the amount of *H. pylori* remaining after six weeks. There was no real difference between the bacterial eradication whether someone took the probiotics or not—82% vs. 80%.

Researchers suggested that due to the lack of effect on reducing the *H. pylori* infection further, there was no reason to add probiotics to the typical treatment regimen. Based on the parameters measured, no other conclusion was warranted. But did they ask the right question?

Study 2

In another study published within weeks of the first study, researchers in Turkey randomized 82 subjects with *H. pylori*-confirmed infections (2). Subjects received a similar triple cocktail of antibiotics with or without probiotics in the form of a yogurt-based drink called Kefir for 14 days. In this case, there was an increased benefit in reducing the *H. pylori* infection for those subjects using the probiotics when compared to those who did not—78% vs. 50%—after 45 days. The researchers concluded that the probiotics improved the treatment effects for the subjects.

Discussion

Two studies; one shows a benefit, the other did not. One could argue that the probiotics were different or that the delivery systems were different or that the length of time was different. All would be true. But there's one thing that the Turkish researchers did that the Portuguese researchers did not: they asked more questions. They gave the subjects a survey to see how they felt before and during the treatment regimen. The subjects taking the probiotics with the traditional treatment felt better and had fewer side-effects throughout the treatment process. For anyone who's had to take antibiotics, reducing the side effects is a huge benefit. It's definitely worth the time and expense to take the probiotics.

Let me use a baseball analogy to explain how we should look at this. If a batter hits a ground ball and then gets to first base at the exact same time as the ball hits the glove of the first baseman, the runner is safe. The term is

“ties go to the runner.” In my opinion, as long as there’s no downside, there are other benefits of using probiotics and their use is warranted.

The Bottom Line

There are many reasons to take a probiotic supplement every day, but it may be even more important when you’re being treated for something like an ulcer. Even if doesn’t have a direct impact on the efficacy of the treatment, reducing the side-effects of the treatment is a tremendous benefit. Always check with your doctor before you decide to use probiotic supplements during treatment for ulcers or any other digestive issue. Just remember—ties go to the runner.

The Digestive Health Webinar is tomorrow afternoon or Wednesday evening. If you or someone you know has digestive issues, don’t miss this webinar.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. Eur J Clin Microbiol Infect Dis. 2011 Jan 5. [Epub ahead of print].
2. J Med Food. 2010 Dec 27. [Epub ahead of print].

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