

HEALTHWATCH



Beneficial bugs

Probiotics are bacteria that are good for the human system. But only when consumed the correct way.

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In recent years there has been a significant upsurge in research on the potential health benefits of probiotics. In addition, the market for probiotics continues to expand exponentially, as consumers and convalescents rely on health claims made by manufacturers to make their choices.

For starters, probiotics are non-pathogenic microorganisms that modify host health or physiology in a positive manner. Hu-

mans have been consuming probiotics for eons mostly as fermented foods.

The use of probiotics to promote gastrointestinal health and immunity — and their use in the prevention of uro-genital infections, allergies and cancer — has been extensively studied. There is scientific evidence that specific strains of probiotic microorganisms confer health benefits to the host and are safe for human use. Many of the benefits are strain-specific and strain selection is, therefore, crucial. Probiotics have potential health benefits for conditions such as gastro-intestinal infections, genitor-urinary infections, allergies and cer-

tain bowel disorders.

Many people believe that yoghurt is the best and only source of probiotic bacteria. But this is not true. Yoghurt may be a good source of probiotic bacteria but not always and is certainly not the only one. Some yoghurt may have been heat-treated to temperatures in which probiotic bacteria can't survive. Even for yoghurt that hasn't been heat-treated one doesn't know how many active probiotic cultures it contains.

Another wrong belief is that all probiotic bacteria are the same in terms of their benefits. Actually, there are many hundred types of probiotic bacteria and different strains have different health

benefits. It is important to understand the diverse mix and administer the type, according to the need.

Further, probiotics need to be stored and transported in cold conditions. Being live cultures, they are inherently unstable in warm conditions. They are also water active, which means the presence of water/moisture promotes growth and multiplication. If nutrients are not available at that time, these cultures die. It is therefore important that medicines and foods that contain probiotics have cold chain transportation and storage. Otherwise they lose their viability.

Often the pH of our gastro-intestinal tract af-

Quick facts

Probiotics occur naturally in yoghurt, buttermilk and some types of pickles. Idli batter, naturally fermented dough and even homemade beer contain beneficial probiotics. But since they are cooked or pasteurised before consumption, the cultures are destroyed.

fects the viability of the probiotic. It is, therefore, important to know which probiotics have to be taken before meals and which after, because what we eat affects the pH of the stomach.

Inclusion of probiotics in regular foods as well as dietary foods is a good thing. But often the claims made by manufacturers are not validated.