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Gut Health: Why Your Gut Matters More Than You Think

Probiotics, prebiotics, fiber...what does it all mean?

There is a lot of discussion about gut health and its importance to overall well-being. With so many products, supplements, and conflicting messages available, it can be difficult to know where to begin.

Gut health is a popular topic for good reason. Scientists have discovered that the health of your gut is closely linked to both physical and mental health. Your gut microbiome, along with adequate fiber intake, plays an important role not only in digestive health but also in immune function, heart health, and even brain health.

Your body hosts trillions of microorganisms, and most of them live in your intestines. These microorganisms help digest food, absorb nutrients, and produce certain vitamins, including vitamins K and several B vitamins. They also help protect against chronic disease by producing anti-inflammatory compounds that support overall health.

So, what exactly are probiotics and prebiotics?

- **Probiotics** are living microorganisms, often referred to as "good bacteria." They are naturally found in fermented foods and beverages such as yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, sourdough bread, and kimchi. Probiotics are also available as dietary supplements. However, keep in mind that supplements are not reviewed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for effectiveness, and it may be difficult to know whether the microorganisms are still alive by the time the product is consumed.
- **Prebiotics** are substances that serve as food for the beneficial bacteria in your gut. They help support the growth and activity of healthy microorganisms. Good sources of prebiotics include fruits, vegetables, legumes, beans, whole grains, nuts, and seeds.

For most people, the best approach is to obtain probiotics, prebiotics, and fiber from the foods they eat rather than relying on supplements. Drinking plenty of water is also important for digestive health. Limiting added sugars and artificial sweeteners may be beneficial since excess sugar can promote the growth of less desirable microorganisms. Regular physical activity helps keep your digestive system functioning properly and supports nutrient absorption.

If you need to take antibiotics for an illness, remember that they can kill beneficial bacteria along with harmful bacteria. Eating a balanced diet rich in probiotic and prebiotic foods may help support your gut microbiome during and after treatment.

Many Western diets fall short when it comes to fiber intake. Fiber is important because it has been associated with lower rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, and type 2 diabetes. It also helps regulate blood sugar levels and supports a healthy gut microbiome.

Adults should aim to meet the recommended daily fiber intake. Men ages 31 to 50 need about 31 grams of fiber per day, while women in the same age group need about 25 grams per day.

Interested in learning more? K-State Research and Extension offers educational resources that can help answer your questions about gut health and healthy eating. Contact our office at **785-364-4125** or thatfield@ksu.edu for more information.