

THE COSTCO CONNECTION

January 2014 • Volume 29 • Number 1

A lifestyle magazine for Costco members



On the safe side

Making food safer from farm to table

page
36

Going pro

The pros of probiotics

By Alice Shapin

JOSH GORDON OF New York suffered with stomach problems for years. He changed his diet, was prescribed medication, but nothing worked. Then a few months ago his doctor suggested he take probiotics. "I'm finally feeling relief," says a very pleased Gordon.

Probiotics are the good bacteria that live in our gut, explains Costco member Dr. Shekhar Challa, a Kansas gastroenterologist and author. We have 100 trillion bacteria in our colon, including over 1,000 different types, with most of them being beneficial. "As long as we maintain a high ratio of good to bad, the bad bacteria behave," says Challa. "The problem occurs when this ratio gets out of whack."

He adds, "Probiotics have long been used in Japan, China and India, and [it] is the new buzzword in the United States."

A variety of benefits

Colorado Costco member Mary Ellen Sanders, who has a Ph.D. in food sciences and is a consultant for the food and dietary supplements industry, points out that many studies have shown that probiotics can promote health in a variety of ways.

"Many people who have difficulty with the side effects of antibiotics are now being advised by their physician to take probiotics. It can also

The Costco Connection

Costco carries probiotics supplements, as well as probiotics-packed traditional and Greek-style yogurt. Costco.com also carries probiotics supplements.

help with mild to moderate irritable bowel syndrome symptoms, diarrhea, bloating and constipation. In addition, there is good evidence that probiotics can decrease the frequency and duration of the common cold and promote immune health. And it's low cost, low risk and potentially very beneficial," she says.

Dr. Julie Chen, whose family belongs to Costco, is a California integrative medicine physician. This specialty integrates conventional and alternative medicine for patients. Chen, who guides patients on the use of supplements, has found that more people are recognizing that probiotics should be part of their health regimen because a healthy immune system can mitigate many health issues.

She says, "We recommend probiotics for pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding so their children may have fewer allergies and skin issues, and for children with allergies and skin conditions, although you should consult with your pediatrician before giving them to your child."

Challa adds, "Now that we are living longer, studies show that as we age our good bacteria count goes down. Probiotics can help keep the good and bad bacteria in balance."

Probiotic sources

Probiotics can be found in yogurt with live, active cultures, sauerkraut, kefir, high-quality dark chocolate, pickles, miso, some

soft cheeses (such as Gouda) and kimchi. However, if you want to take probiotics to treat a specific condition, you are better off sticking with sources tested for the benefit you're looking for, notes Sanders.


"When buying foods, look at the ingredients on the label, and if you aren't sure, call the company," says Sanders. According to the International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics, supplement labels should tell you what probiotic strains the product contains, how many live microorganisms are in each serving, when they expire, how much you should take, what the product can do for you, where to keep it for maximum survival of the probiotics and where to go for more information.

Sanders suggests that, whether you are buying food with probiotics or probiotics supplements, you should look for ones with both *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, to increase your chances of getting a strain that works for you.

Precautions and recommendations

Chen says, "Consult a physician before giving probiotics supplements to people with compromised immune systems or other major illnesses." And if you're not sure about taking probiotics, ask your doctor and bring in the probiotics bottle, since all probiotics are not equal.

Some doctors believe you should take probiotics supplements routinely, as with vitamins. Others suggest you take supplements only when needed for a specific condition. Costco member Judy Caplan of Virginia, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, takes probiotics supplements if she's on antibiotics and after she's traveled abroad. According to Challa, you should take between 1 billion and 3 billion bacteria per day for general health and between 5 billion and 10 billion per day when dealing with an illness.

Challa, who takes probiotics daily, says, "My mantra has been 'Probiotics are the next vitamins.' Go back 50 years, when we only took vitamins if we had a problem. Now, people take vitamins as part of healthy living. That's where I believe we are going with probiotics." 

Alice Shapin is a Maryland-based freelance writer who covers a variety of health issues.



PHOTO: © WAVEBREAKMEDIA LTD / AGE FOTOSTOCK