

Probiotics enhance the body's own microbial environment

Q&A

Dr Neerja Hajela

Walk down any city supermarket, and you will see shelves adorned with the latest probiotic drinks in the

market. Any food that contains viable micro-organisms with a

defined health benefit can be categorised as probiotic food. We all know the benefits of these drinks. But who should take it, how and when, are some of the questions that Dr Neerja Hajela answered in a tete-a-tete with DNA's Soumita Majumdar.

What are the various benefits of probiotics?

The role of probiotics for prevention of diarrhoea is proven. Besides diarrhoea global research indicates that probiotic may be useful in Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), prevention of recurrence of cancer, antibiotic as-

sociated diarrhoea, allergies and more.

Is there any study to prove that probiotic drinks can lead to decrease in diarrhoea?

Yes, very recently a large double blind randomised placebo controlled field trial was conducted at the National Institute of Cholera and Enteric Diseases (ICMR). The trial was done to evaluate the effect of probiotics in preventing acute diarrhoea in 3,585 children aged between one and five years. The children were randomly grouped to receive either the probiotic or the placebo (fermented milk drink without the

probiotic strain) for a period of 12 weeks and were followed up for another 12 weeks.

The results of the 24 week study, revealed that the incidence of diarrhoea was lower in the probiotic group as compared to the placebo. In spite of the fact that the probiotic was given only for 12 weeks it resulted in a significant reduction of diarrhoea episodes by 14% in the probiotic group. The study suggests that daily intake of a probiotic drink can play an important role in the prevention of acute diarrhoea in young children, in a community setting of a developing country like India.

Is it effective only in the case of children?

Probiotic foods are beneficial for all age groups—children, adults and the elderly. With age the beneficial bacteria in our gut declines in number, and probiotics help replenish the beneficial bacteria that helps improve digestion and build immunity.

What is the ideal dosage that one must take?

Different strains will need to be taken in different doses to avail health benefits. However, experts recommend regular consumption of at least 10 million organisms to elicit a defined health benefit.

What can be an ideal substitute?

Today probiotic foods with defined health benefits are available in the form of yoghurt and fermented milk drinks. Probiotic foods available globally contain beneficial bacteria in large numbers, which may not be found in the natural foods we consume every day.

Many such products are now making an entry into the Indian market. With increasing stress and digestive disorders, experts recommend probiotic foods with proven health benefits as a part of the daily diet.

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