Promoting a Healthy Digestive System

Everything we eat and drink passes through our mouth, esophagus, stomach, and then the small and large intestine where nutrients for our body are absorbed. The intestines are lined with a thin, sticky mucous, and this is where millions of bacteria (both beneficial and harmful) live and grow.

Prebiotics

The beneficial or “good” bacteria in our intestines grow well when certain nutrients are available. These natural, non-digestible food components are called prebiotics. They include fructo-oligo-saccharides, such as inulin (chicory root fiber) and galacto-oligo-saccharides, a type of fiber found in bananas, onions, garlic, leeks, asparagus, artichokes, soybeans and whole-wheat foods.

Probiotics

The "good" or “friendly” bacteria we depend on in our digestive system are called probiotics. It is the large number of these bacteria (such as bifidobacteria and lactic acid bacteria) that ensure good health and prevent diseases of the gut.

These probiotics help remove poisonous or harmful substances that enter the body. They can also stop the growth of harmful bacteria by producing acids that lower the pH of the large intestine. The lower pH also prevents the absorption of cholesterol and bile acids in the colon, reducing the risk of some cancers. They can lower serum cholesterol levels by reducing the production of cholesterol in the body, reducing heart disease risk. Some strains of these live cultures help treat irritable bowel syndrome symptoms, may help prevent specific allergy symptoms, reduce symptoms of lactose intolerance and more.

References:
http://www.todaysdietitian.com/newarchives/060112p58.shtml
You can get probiotics that contain live cultures from fermented food. Fermentation is the breakdown of food by beneficial bacteria and is one of mankind’s oldest ways of preserving food.

Fermented dairy foods include yogurt or Greek yogurt (with active or live cultures), Kefir products (goat or cow’s), and aged cheeses. Many people who are lactose intolerant can tolerate yogurt, cheese and other fermented dairy foods.

Some non-dairy foods which also have beneficial cultures include: Sauerkraut (Germany – fermented cabbage), Kimchi (Korea – fermented vegetables), Miso (Japan – fermented beans, grains), Tempeh (Indonesia – fermented beans and sometimes grains), and Kombucha (various Asian traditions – fermented tea).

Today, many commercially-pickled vegetables use a vinegar brine solution to pickle the produce. If you see vinegar on the ingredient list, the product is likely not fermented. Processed foods and today’s grains (processed white flour) versus eating ancient grains (like quinoa, barley, oats, buckwheat and chia) have a big impact on digestive health. To help improve it and prevent disease, one should eat lots of complex carbohydrates (from fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grain cereals) and limit red meat. Food sources of pre- and pro-biotics should be our main sources in our diet; however, supplements can be helpful in supporting gut health if the diet is not sufficient.

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**Have a nutritional question or concern?** If you are participating in services offered by Schenectady County’s Senior and Long Term Care services, you are eligible to have a free consultation with a Registered Dietitian. Call Cornell Cooperative Extension, Schenectady County at 372-1622, ext. 269. Leave a message, if necessary, for dietitian to call you back.

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OFA-Promoting a Healthy Digestive System 1/2017

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**Consumer-centered access for long-term care information, referrals and assessments. For information, call 382-8481, #9, ext.304**