Probiotics for Travelers

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

If you've had a vacation or business trip ruined by diarrhea and indigestion, you might want to bring a probiotic supplement on your next trip. A good supplement will help your body protect itself against the bacteria that typically cause "traveler's diarrhea" and enable you to spend your trip seeing the sights instead of the bathrooms.

Probiotics are a combination of living, beneficial bacteria that occur naturally in the human intestinal tract. They are essential for maintaining healthy digestion. A growing body of evidence suggests that the use of probiotics can help treat and prevent a wide array of intestinal-tract disorders, including traveler's diarrhea.

Probiotics have been examined for their effectiveness in the prevention and treatment of such gastrointestinal disorders as antibiotic-associated diarrhea, various forms of bacterial and viral diarrhea, inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease), irritable bowel syndrome, small-bowel bacterial overgrowth, and lactose intolerance. Probiotics may also help prevent the development of colon cancer.

Most cases of traveler's diarrhea are caused by e-coli bacteria. Travelers in developing nations often pick up this infection from contaminated water or from raw vegetables washed with raw water. One of the many things that probiotics do is create natural antibiotics, called bacteriocins. When you ingest bacteriocins, you can nip e-coli infections in the bud.

I recommend a probiotic supplement called Sensitive Colon Support or GastroComplete, from New Chapter, Inc. It is available at most health-food stores.

I also recommend that you continue taking a probiotic supplement after you return from your next trip, as probiotics do far more than simply combat traveler's diarrhea. In the coming years, you'll be hearing much more about the power of probiotics.

An easy way to understand how bacteria aid in digestion is to consider how yogurt is made. Add beneficial bacteria (usually lactobacilli) to milk, incubate for a few days at 90-something degrees, and you have yogurt. Take milk and leave it at that temperature for a few days, without the benefit of the beneficial bacteria, and you have sour milk. Similarly, if you don't have the right blend of bacteria in your gut, your body may be making the gastrointestinal equivalent of sour milk. Without the proper balance of good and bad bacteria, your body will be unable to optimally extract nutrients from your food, and the lining of your intestinal tract may become damaged. This can result in a series of secondary problems.

Probiotics are essential to the maintenance of a normal mucosa (lining of the intestine), as they block the invasion of pathogenic, or disease-causing, bacteria. When an imbalance between "bad bacteria" and "good bacteria" exists, the mucosa of the intestinal tract becomes leaky, allowing

larger food and bacterial particles to be absorbed into the bloodstream. The immune system activates as the body tries to fight off these invaders.

To visualize the problem, imagine an unusually porous coffee filter, with holes so big that the coffee grounds pass through the paper and into the coffee pot. In the body, large food and bacterial particles that leak through a porous intestinal lining and into the bloodstream can bring about a host of non-gastrointestinal-tract diseases such as chronic fatigue syndrome, allergies and autoimmune disorders.

The bacterial imbalance that leads to these difficulties can be caused by a variety of factors, including the use of antibiotics to ward off infections. Antibiotics are indiscriminate with respect to the bacteria they eliminate, and the beneficial bacteria in the gut can become "collateral damage" in the fight against infections. Another cause of the imbalance relates to diet.

In the past, bacterial fermentation of food was a common practice, and the human diet contained thousands of beneficial bacteria. That is not the case in the United States today. In some cultures, however, beneficial bacteria remain a staple. In Japan, for example, miso soup is consumed regularly. Miso consists of a fermented soybean paste, which contains good bacteria. Many experts speculate that the lower incidence of colon cancer in Japan versus the United States may be explained by the relative lack of beneficial bacteria in the American diet.

Many people who report apparent food intolerances might, in fact, be experiencing gastrointestinal symptoms arising from an imbalance of bacteria. Symptoms might include bloating, belching, excessive gas production, and altered bowel movements—either diarrhea or constipation. Symptoms often attributed to irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, also may be attributable to this imbalance. Many, if not most, of the patients I treat for IBS experience dramatic improvements in their symptoms after a course of probiotics.

Bottom line: Probiotics are an integral part of normal digestion and general health. The absence of beneficial bacteria in the gut may result in a variety of digestive symptoms and other medical conditions, including the inability to protect effectively against traveler's diarrhea. Replenishment of the gut with viable, beneficial bacteria can have multiple positive effects. Sensitive Colon Support or GastroComplete from New Chapter, Inc., is an excellent probiotic and is available at most health-food stores.

Gerard L. Guillory, M.D., is board-certified in internal medicine and has been practicing in Aurora, Colo., since July 1985. As an assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Dr. Guillory is actively involved in teaching medical students, resident physicians, and nurse practitioner students. He has lectured extensively on the role of nutrition and disease. Over the years, he has fostered an interest in patient education and has authored three books on digestive troubles. He also has served as medical director of a Colorado-based health plan and as a health consultant to employer groups. Visit his medical practice on the Web at www.thecaregrouppc.com.