



Five Things to Know About the Health of Your Gut

By: Al Lewis, founder of Quizzify

A decade ago, I had been taking Prilosec for chronic indigestion, on doctor's orders, for 2 years.

I didn't think twice about it, since Prilosec controlled my heartburn, and I wasn't "feeling" any side effects. Of course, like every Quizzify user, I now recognize the many hidden hazards of nightly use of Prilosec, Prevacid and Nexium. But not then. I just thought they "worked."

Then one day in the supermarket I asked a worker where another item would be found. He said he didn't know because he was a Dannon employee, restocking their yogurt case. I thanked him and started walking away. He called out after me: "Do you suffer from frequent heartburn?"

Needless to say, he caught my attention. "As a matter of fact, I do," I replied.

He handed me a coupon for some free Activia. He explained that Dannon's new offering was the first national brand with active yogurt cultures. "Try eating one of two of these for a couple of weeks. See what happens to your heartburn."

I did, and my chronic indigestion completely disappeared in four days.

Until then, I had had no idea there were trillions of "foreign" bacteria in and on our bodies, and less than no idea about the vital roles they play in our everyday health.

I had plenty of company. Until recently, the idea that humans played host to more foreign cells than cells with our own DNA was considered a curiosity more than anything else. Now these cells are the focus of some of the most intense research in all of biology.

These microorganisms – perhaps 1000 species comprising maybe four pounds of your body's weight – were once thought harmless or irrelevant. Turns out they are actually beneficial. While a fair number reside on your skin (so it's not a good idea to be too clean!), the vast majority of these "probiotics" reside in your small and particularly large intestines, collectively known as 'the gut microbiome.'

What do the latter probiotics do? They help you digest your food by feeding on it themselves. But the list is much longer:

- As in my case, they can prevent, relieve, or even cure chronic indigestion;
- They inhibit growth of bad bacteria – the type that cause irritable bowel syndrome – by using up their space and nutrients;
- They digest fiber, which humans can't digest on their own. This is thought to reduce cancer risk.

These are just the virtually certain benefits. A list of possible benefits being suggested – from preventing depression to regulating appetite – would take up all of this newsletter.

You can do at least four things to take care of your gut microbiome...and then it will take care of you.

Do not demand antibiotics

Americans get far too many antibiotics without us demanding our doctors to "do something." November's quiz (still available on your Quizzify page!) taught that pediatricians, dentists, urgent care doctors and telemedicine doctors vastly overprescribe antibiotics. Why? Sometimes to make the patient happy, sometimes on the off-chance an infection (like a sinus or throat infection) is caused by bacteria even before they culture it, and sometimes because they are simply not aware of the downsides – the damage that antibiotics can do to your gut microbiome.

If you do get prescribed antibiotics, take probiotics too

Those of you who regularly play Quizzify know we find very little value in most supplements for most people. Probiotic pills are an exception, especially when you are prescribed antibiotics. Antibiotics can't distinguish between the "good" and "bad" bacteria in your gut. Unless you get side effects like bloating, constipation, or diarrhea, you would have no idea that literally trillions of "friendly" bacteria are being killed when you take antibiotics.

Space probiotic supplements between your antibiotic doses. Taking them at the same time would cancel them out. Continue these supplements for a while even after you've completed the antibiotic course.

Make foods with probiotics a part of your diet

Yogurts are by far the most easily attainable, diverse, and, to most of us, tastiest source of probiotics in the diet. (Ten others are listed here.) But there are two asterisks.

First, many yogurts contain no probiotics. Rule of thumb: if you recognize the brand name from your childhood, it doesn't contain probiotics...but probably does contain lots of added sugars. Look for "active culture" on the label.

Second, mix it up. There are, as mentioned, more than 1000 species of these little critters. Try two weeks at a time of different yogurts.

Don't overlook the prebiotics

Not a misprint. There is a big difference. Probiotics are living cells. Prebiotics are the food they eat. As with probiotics and unlike most fad supplements, packaged prebiotic supplements are likely beneficial and won't harm you.

Probiotics generally thrive on fiber. But 1000 different species of probiotics don't all process the same fiber. So vary your natural sources of prebiotics, among (for example) asparagus, garlic, onions, unripe bananas, and oats. A full list can be found here.

