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## The importance of micro-flora in maintaining good health.

With so many adverts on our TVs for probiotic drinks and yoghurt with added 'friendly bacteria' it is difficult to know the truth about the importance of 'gut flora' to our health and well-being. I am often asked questions around this topic and so I include below a short article I recently wrote on the subject.

In the average bowel there exist huge colonies of micro-organisms (at least 400 strains) which in total weigh between 3 and 5 lb and in numbers are greater than the total number of cells in the body! Oxygen-intolerant (anaerobic) bacteria account for the great majority of gut flora.

Whilst there are considerable quantities of pathogenic (illness-creating) bacteria passing through the gut, in the healthy individual the vast majority of this gut flora is symbiotic, i.e. whilst the microbes derive their livelihood by living off humans, they in turn, provide a vital service to us. Colonies of bacteria vary in composition and role throughout the length of the gastro-intestinal tract. Whilst there is a mixture of 'helpful' and pathogenic organisms (including the yeast *Candida*) in the mouth, much of the pathogenic bacteria are destroyed in the intensively acid environment of the stomach. Individuals who have a low stomach acid are vulnerable to pathogens passing inappropriately further along the digestive tract. It is in the small intestine that the absorption of nutrients occurs. Here symbiotic bacteria maintain the optimum environment for that absorption, adhering to the walls of the tract where the majority are *Lactobacillus* strains. In the large intestine, mainly populated by *Bifidobacteria*, microbes assist in the peristaltic movement of waste, and as they die off to be evacuated as faeces, they release vital minerals which become bio-available to their host. Additionally they assist the synthesis of B vitamin complex. Another particularly important function of gut micro-flora is to assist the maintenance of the immune function of the body. Antibodies in the blood find and recognise foreign antigens: bacteria, viruses or fungi which, in a healthy individual, are then neutralised. This process relies in part on the integrity of the gut wall.

When the immune system is weakened, the normal flora of the gut becomes imbalanced allowing bacteria, yeasts and other microbes to multiply. Factors that can encourage a weakened immune system include: use of the Pill or steroid medication; long-term or frequent anti-biotic use; mercury amalgam dental fillings; chemical pollutants and stress. In addition, some individuals are born with weakened immunity or acquire it early in life. The disturbances in natural gut flora allow the digestive tract wall to become more permeable, i.e. molecules of protein and sugar normally kept within the gut pass through the epithelial lining into the blood stream where they are detected as foreign invaders by the immune system.



## Micro-flora ...



This 'leaky gut syndrome' also describes the way that yeast can penetrate the gut wall encouraging symptoms such as vaginal thrush, food intolerances, constipation, bloatedness and flatulence. Additionally, yeast (*Candida albicans*) can disrupt the endocrine system causing symptoms such as depression, poor concentration, chronic tiredness etc.

Solutions to the problem of weakened immunity and leaky gut syndrome include:

- the restoration of healthy gut flora by introducing probiotic bacteria (usually in capsule form);
- actively killing *Candida* infestation;
- removing sugar and refined carbohydrates from the diet;
- replacement of deficient vitamins and minerals particularly the B complex;
- treating 'leaky gut' and supporting liver and immune function with specific supplements for the purpose.

The trouble is that whilst the above can help a great deal it does all sound rather complicated. Which probiotics are the right ones? How do you know if you have 'leaky gut'? What supplements best support liver function? What is there to eat if I have to give up carbohydrates - and what counts as these anyway? These are very good questions and in truth it is important to get professional advice when trying to change digestive habits or deal with debilitating symptoms. Seek help from a nutritionist, an allergy therapist or colon hydrotherapist. It really is surprising how quickly most bowel conditions can be helped - if you know what is going on and what to do about it!

