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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



What I've learned about probiotics

Last month I got really sick. I woke up in the middle of the night shaking convulsively from chills. I finally fell asleep after covering myself with multiple comforters. By morning, I was sweating and had a 103° fever. Questions flew through my mind. Did I have the flu? Could it be a reaction to a flu shot a couple days earlier? And then there was this pain, as if I pulled a muscle on the right side of my waist. I asked my husband to take me to urgent care.

Following a urine test, the doctor determined I had a kidney infection. I didn't realize I had a urinary tract infection (UTI) and somehow the bacteria migrated into my kidney. The doctor prescribed a round of antibiotics — really strong ones — but not strong enough. Two days later the fever and pain in my side returned, so I went to the emergency room.

Now the emergency room is its own complexity. And the wait is always long unless you're bleeding profusely. About three hours after arriving, I was moved to a room where they started an IV with an even stronger antibiotic. Everything I've read about antibiotics scares me. Yes they are needed to fight difficult infections, but it's a double-edged medicine that kills off the bad and good bacteria and microbes in our bodies. One of the side effects is bacterial resistance or antibiotic resistance which can lead to other infections. With the new antibiotic and another lab test seven days later, I was declared cured of the kidney infection.

But why did I still feel awful? During the two weeks following my ER visit, it seemed like everything I ate landed me in the bathroom. After another lab test, I was told I had another infection, this time from the antibiotics, which killed off all the good bacteria and made me vulnerable to *Clostridium difficile* (also known as *C. difficile* or *C. diff*), a deadly form of diarrhea that is potentially contagious through touch. Most likely I contracted *C. diff* at the hospital, which is a place rife with potential infections. So I was put on yet another round of antibiotics four times a day for 10 days.

During this medical odyssey, I learned a great deal about taking probiotic supplements and eating

probiotic foods. With my doctor's permission, I took a probiotic pill two hours before each antibiotic dose. Probiotics are live bacteria and yeasts that are good for you — in effect, they are the good germs in your body. My regimen of probiotics before the antibiotic pill helped my digestive system get back to some semblance of normalcy, but it was still difficult to find foods I could eat without upsetting my stomach.

I ate bland foods like potatoes and rice until I researched probiotic foods. It's fortunate that several probiotic foods are actually many of the stinky foods I love, such as fermented soybean products (natto and tempeh) and fermented cabbages (kimchi and sauerkraut) as well as yogurt and fermented drinks (keifer, buttermilk, and kombucha). I even found a probiotic granola online that I can eat with the yogurt.

My diet now consists of those foods in combination with white rice, soft bread, potatoes, ramen, and spaghetti noodles. I can eat vegetables that are boiled down as well as minimal fresh fruit. The only upside to this whole ordeal is that I lost 10 pounds. I'm slowly feeling better and stronger though I still feel vulnerable to other infections. I wash my hands constantly and have been avoiding public spaces with a lot of people.

From now on I'll be taking a probiotic supplement each morning and making sure I eat probiotic foods on a regular basis. I've learned it's best to research the type of probiotic that's ideal for your body, which depends on what you want it to do for you. I use it for my digestive system and also for building immunity. It may even help with weight loss. I've chosen supplements that give me millions of strains of bacteria. I know that sounds weird, but hey, it's been helping so far and I'll continue to take them and include them in my diet. I think it's also worth talking to your doctor about what might be right for you, especially if you are prescribed antibiotics.

As we get older, the more we can do to proactively build up our health and resistance to infections, the better. Be sure to do your research, eat nutritious food, and always wash your hands. And if you ever have a fever, chills, and pain in your side that feels like a pulled muscle, go to the doctor immediately!

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