

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Aug 16, 2012

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You've probably noticed various recent news reports about the effects that all the bacteria in our guts are having on our health. For decades, if we thought about them at all, we considered our gut bacteria useless freeloaders, just riding along taking advantage of our meals. Most of the time they didn't do any harm, but they were not good for anything either. Gradually medical science learned that some were actually good for us. They help digest some food. The 'good guys' protect us from food poisoning. They help our immune system and prevent some colon cancers. Some even make vitamins for us. Now the doctors tell us that some might even affect our mental health, how much or what we eat and how fat or thin we are!

So should we all be running out to buy more probiotics? Fortunately no, at least not yet. What growing numbers of studies are finding though, is that we have different sets of bacteria in there. And yes, obese people in general have different bacteria from those who are thin. But consider this: Each of us carries around about 500 different kinds of bacteria, just in our guts. And we each have an average of 100 trillion of them in total in there. (That's 100 with 12 more zeros behind it!) If you include all the different bacteria that live on our skin, hair, mouths, ears, nose and genitals, there are trillions more. So one small dose of probiotic yogurt a day is barely going to be noticed by all those already in place.

Where do they all come from? We start picking them up as we are being born. One researcher called babies 'bacteria magnets' because they get so many in such a

short time. Then we add to them from our families, food, where we live, work and play. If we get sick we might lose a few to antibiotics, then gain more from the hospital or medical facilities. So even members of the same family will have slightly different sets. And there is evidence that our genes help determine which ones stick with us longer.

Obese and thin people usually have different kinds of bacteria. So of course there's research to see if changing our bacteria could make us lose or gain weight. Just as there are at least 500 kinds of bacteria in our guts, there are thousands of kinds to choose from. Concentrated doses of very specific kinds, fed to rats, did help reduce the amount of weight the rats gained. Very high numbers of certain bacteria fed to people after they'd had weight-loss surgery helped them lose more weight. But in some cases the bacteria after surgery caused severe infections. And some bacteria help their host people absorb more calories and gain more weight from their food! So this 'treatment' is definitely not ready for prime time.

On the other hand, there is a lot we can do very safely to encourage and keep happy the good bacteria we all ready have. Most of the healthy bacteria prefer to grow on foods with lots of fiber. That means that plenty of beans and lentils, whole grains, vegetables, fruits and nuts will keep them growing well. These happen to be the same things that are good for us as well.

Whole grains and beans have carbohydrates combined with several different kinds of fibers. Veggies and fruits provide sugars, minerals and other kinds of fibers. Nuts and seeds have oils, proteins and more fiber. Good bacteria can use all these fibers for their own growth. They keep the bad bacteria from growing while they stimulate our immune systems and produce chemicals that stop cancer. For once being

considered a bunch of freeloaders, they're now heavy hitters of the best kind!

For dinner tonight, make your inner bacteria and your taste buds happy with this flavorful stew. It only takes half an hour and you can do it in the skillet. Serve with plenty of chopped lettuce, tomato and avocado plus some fat-free Greek yogurt for as extra toppings.

Mexican Fiesta Stew

2 pounds lean hamburger	1 onion, chopped
1 green and 1 red pepper, chopped	1 15-oz can black bean
1 12-oz can tomato sauce	1 12-oz can enchilada sauce, mild or hot
Low fat corn chips	Shredded low fat cheese

Brown hamburger in heavy skillet. Add onion and peppers and cook until onion is clear. Add beans, tomato and enchilada sauces. Simmer for ½ hour on low. Stir occasionally. Add salt and pepper to taste. Put a few corn chips in each bowl, add stew and top with a sprinkle of shredded cheese. Serve with other toppings on the side. Serves 8.