

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Probiotics seem to be turning up in all kinds of foods these days. They've gone from yogurt to chocolates, nutrition bars, chewing gum, drinks and more. If we all used them we might be feeling a lot better. Or maybe not. What's good and what's bad about them?

Probiotics are basically good. They are bacteria that can live in our intestines and help us. Probiotic foods are foods that give us large doses of bacteria. Some help by keeping other not-so-good bacteria from growing. Who knows how much food poisoning we avoid because of the good bacteria we carry around. Others are good because they produce small fats that protect the lining of our lower intestines from damage. Some help with digestion, and possible constipation. Others produce a variety of other chemicals that help protect our systems, that are vitamins we need, or in other ways that we haven't figured out yet.

There are a lot of different bacteria that can be probiotics for us. Many of them grow well in milk and dairy products. A couple are the ones we've used for generations to produce yogurt, buttermilk or other fermented dairy foods. So it makes sense that a lot of the foods advertised for their probiotic benefits are yogurts.

Kefir is a new addition to the dairy case. It's a fermented milk, sort of a cross between buttermilk and a drinkable yogurt. Natural kefir is on the sour side, but there are lots of flavored varieties coming on the market too. A big part of the advertising for

it is based on its history from the mountains of Eastern Europe where people lived to amazingly old ages. Of course, there may be other reasons for their ages too!

There are other foods that will give us a healthy dose of good bacteria too, not just dairy foods. For example, good, old fashioned sauerkraut is one choice. The bacteria that ferment cabbage are good for us. So are the bacteria used to make kimchi, the fermented Korean vegetable side dish. If you don't care for plain sauerkraut, try it on a Reuben sandwich, or added to soup.

Fermented soy products such as tempeh and miso are also sources of good bacteria. Tempeh is made of whole soybeans fermented together into a loaf. It has a lot more texture and flavor than tofu. You can slice and fry it, or marinate and grill or broil it to make it almost crunchy. Miso is also made from fermented soybeans, but may have barley or rice added to it. It has a texture like peanut butter, and is mostly added as a seasoning to sauces, soups and other dishes.

In addition to all the foods, there are plenty of probiotic supplements on the market, as pills, tablets, powders and probably liquids too. Unfortunately, since probiotics are live bacteria, to give their benefit they still have to be live when we eat them. And a lot of supplements have problems with that. Many tested supplements had many fewer than they claimed, some had no live bacteria. And it's practically impossible to tell by a label which will be good.

With all that's good about probiotics, are there any reasons why someone should not use them? Yes. People who have weak immune systems, very sick people, very old people and infants should probably avoid them. The large dose of live bacteria, even if they are good, can be too much for some systems to handle. But for healthy

adults, some extra probiotic foods or bacteria could very well be beneficial.

If you're almost ready to try some tempeh, here's a recipe with very familiar flavorings. These can be served over pasta or in a salad. Look for tempeh in the fresh produce section of the grocery.

Italian Tempeh Tidbits

8 oz tempeh

1 Tbsp olive oil

2 ½ Tbsp balsamic vinegar

2 ½ Tbsp low sodium soy sauce

2 cloves garlic, minced

¼ tsp red pepper flakes (or more)

1 Tbsp Italian seasoning

Cut tempeh into ½ inch cubes. Combine other ingredients in a container with a lid, mixing well. Add tempeh, put on lid and shake gently to coat all the cubes. Refrigerate at least 1 hour, or overnight, shaking container several times. Heat a non-stick skillet over medium low heat. Add tempeh and any marinade remaining and cook slowly about 10 minutes. Keep turning gently until they darken and the sauce is absorbed. Serve with pasta, rice or salads. Serves 4.