

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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How Much Can You Believe about Probiotics?

Anyone who's ever looked for health information on line has been offered information on probiotics. They've most likely been offered 20 'deals' to order, or get their daily/weekly/monthly doses on line too! Actually 20 offers is probably an understatement. A recent analysis of information on probiotics 'limited' themselves to 71 sites. They had a total of 131 websites, but didn't use sites that were *only selling* probiotics. They also didn't look at sites that were specifically medical or research sites, or ones that were for pets or other animals. What they looked for was - How accurate is the information on the web?

It's probably no surprise that the non-commercial sites came out much better than the commercial ones did. The non-commercial sites were run by organizations, news media, individuals, hospitals, universities or the government. These were about half the sites in the comparison. Commercial sites were mainly selling products but also claiming to provide information.

There was not a lot of difference between the commercial or non-commercial sites in how easy they were to use. But there was a big difference between the two groups when the contents were compared. Non-commercial sites were much better at giving a balanced view of both the benefits and the risks of using probiotics. They were also much more likely to be up-to-date with their information.

The non-commercial sites gave information on the benefits, but also on how likely you were to see those benefits. And they gave much more information on what the risks are of using various probiotics. The commercial sites on the other hand had plenty of information on the benefits, glowing testimonials about how much they helped people, and everything that a probiotic might possibly cure. But they barely mentioned the risks.

Those risks range from minor, such as headaches or gas, to more serious issues such as bacterial infections. There are also more risks for special populations such as pregnant women, small children and people with compromised immune systems.

As for the benefits, these were mentioned 10 times as often as the risks. But many of the benefits claimed have not been proved or even tested. There's no evidence at all that probiotics can help prevent cancer, or that they can help manage autism. There is some evidence that probiotics can help with some intestinal problems. But some conditions can be made much worse by adding billions more live bacteria into your system. And healthy people are unlikely to notice much difference at all in their health with probiotics. (The size of their wallets however may be much, much thinner.)

So what are we to do? The most important thing is to talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits, compared to your medications and conditions, before you spend money on any of them! If you're searching for information on health issues, be sure to use websites that have a .gov or .edu ending for most of your information. Some that end in .org will be good too. A good place to start is the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine website, <http://nccam.nih.gov/>. There's an A to Z index of health topics' information, as well as info on herbs and on recent research. Another good place to look is www.ConsumerLab.com. It's a .com, but it sells nothing, not even advertising. It does independent analysis of products, and has a great encyclopedia of products, illnesses and claims. Websites from hospitals like Mayo Clinic will also be reliable. Ask, read, and don't get taken by miracle claims!

Here's a super quick breakfast smoothie that has fruit and dairy all in one glass. It'll add some probiotics if you choose yogurt with 'live' or 'active yogurt cultures'. Check the label to get that kind. The fiber of the fruits will help promote the growth of good bacteria too.

Tropical Smoothies

2 medium ripe bananas, peeled and frozen

1 cup non-fat vanilla yogurt

½ cup orange juice

8-10 ice cubes

1 cup canned pineapple, crushed or tidbits

sprinkle of cinnamon, optional

Put all ingredients except cinnamon in blender or food processor and process until smooth. Pour into 3 glasses, sprinkle with cinnamon, serve. Serves 3.

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