Ask the Dietician

What are probiotics? Should I be taking them?

Probiotics are “friendly” bacteria which exist naturally within our digestive system and are beneficial to our digestive tract and overall health. Everyone’s gastrointestinal (GI) tract contains a combination of “good” and “bad” bacteria. What is most important for good health is maintaining a balance between the two. Having too many bad bacteria and not enough good will cause GI problems, such as constipation, diarrhea, gas and bloating. Poor diet, medications (specifically antibiotics) and environmental factors can all cause bacterial imbalance. By eating probiotic-rich foods or taking probiotic supplements, we can rebalance our bacteria and prevent or treat many digestive problems.

Probiotics are essential to maintaining a healthy digestive system. You may be surprised to learn that many of the foods you are already eating, such as yogurts, cheese, pickles or sourdough bread, are rich in probiotics of various types! If you are seeking to solve a specific GI problem, it’s best to choose a supplement which contains the probiotic strain best suited to address that particular issue. Always read the label to learn exactly what a given probiotic can do for you.

Foods highest in probiotics:

- Yogurt (look for “live, active cultures” on the label)
- Soft cheeses
- Sauerkraut (unpasteurized)
- Miso soup
- Tempeh (also a great vegetarian source of protein!)
- Soy milk (look for “live, active cultures” on the label)
- Sourdough bread
- Kefir (something like a mix between milk and yogurt!)
- Pickles or olives in brine

Foods high in probiotics are typically labeled:

- Raw
- Fermented
- Live active cultures
- Unpasteurized

Source: http://cid.oxfordjournals.org/content/46/Supplement_2/S96.long
Ask the Pharmacist
What is the Difference Between Brand Name Drugs and Generics?

Almost 90% of prescriptions dispensed from pharmacies are a generic equivalent of the brand name drug prescribed. By law, a pharmacy must indicate that a generic drug is being dispensed in place of the brand name medication prescribed, but consumers are frequently left wondering whether there is any difference between the two. The public can rest assured that when a generic drug is dispensed, it has undergone rigorous testing to ensure safety and efficacy comparable to that of its brand name counterpart. What is it, then, that distinguishes brand name drugs from generics?

In the majority of instances, brand name drugs have never been marketed before; however, they may also be new formulations of or improvements on existing medications. The key to brand name exclusivity is that a pharmaceutical company must demonstrate the drug’s safety and efficacy in clinical trials. As these trials are very expensive, in exchange for bearing these costs, pharmaceutical companies are offered marketing exclusivity of the brand name drug for a period, usually between 10 and 15 years. At the end of this time, other pharmaceutical companies can legally manufacture generic versions of the drug.

Manufacturers that market generic drugs must obtain the approval of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to do so. A generic drug must contain the same active ingredients as the brand name drug and be of the same strength and dosage. The company producing the drug must demonstrate that its generic version produces the same levels of active drug in the blood stream, meaning that it must be bioequivalent to the brand name drug. Generic drug manufacturers must also abide by the same quality standards as brand name producers. Why, then, are generic drugs 80-85% less costly than brand name medications?

Generic drugs can be offered at substantial savings because the manufacturers do not have to repeat the costly clinical trials required to obtain FDA approval of the brand name product, as long as the manufacturer of the generic version can demonstrate that it is bioequivalent to the brand name formulation. Just as with brand name drugs, the FDA monitors generic versions for adverse events. Many studies have, time and again, demonstrated that bioequivalent generic drugs are just as effective as the brand name products on which they are based.

What does this mean for the consumer?

1) Generic drugs are scientifically proven to be equivalent to brand name drugs
2) Generic drugs are just as effective as brand name drugs
3) Generic drugs are substantially less expensive than brand name drugs (in fact, they save over 3 billion dollars per week)
4) Generic drug manufacturers must abide by the same rules for quality assurance
5) Generic drugs are monitored for safety as closely as brand name drugs