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Are your children eating enough 'bugs'?

a Don't worry...I'm not talking about the same bugs you are probably thinking about! The "bugs" I am referring to are beneficial bacteria. You know, those microscopic critters found in yogurt, for example. These 'good bugs,' or probiotics as they are technically called, have been getting quite a bit of attention from researchers lately.

In the typical adult intestinal tract, there are literally trillions of bacteria with representatives from over 400 species. These bacteria all co-exist and perform functions that are helpful to us, their gracious hosts. Kids are born without any of these probiotics but are presented with them as they pass through the birth canal. This starts the process, and the bacteria grow in number from there. If this sounds gross, don't worry. Remember that these probiotics are doing good things for your baby. And from the growing body of research, they may be doing even more good than anyone thought.

Our intestinal tract is quite an amazing thing. On the one hand, it processes the food we eat and allows us to absorb life-sustaining nutrients. On the other hand, it acts as a protective barrier, standing guard against the absorption of anything that doesn't belong in our bloodstream. In fact, at least half of our immune system lives in our intestinal tract!

Should excessive immune activity occur in the intestinal tract, however, trouble begins. This gut-level immune response triggers immune reactions in other regions of the body, such as the respiratory system. Which brings us to allergies and asthma.

As unconnected as it may seem, researchers are indeed finding a common link between the gut and the nose and lungs. Studies are showing that giving therapeutic doses (higher amounts than found in your typical yogurt) of certain healthy bacteria can reduce the abnormal

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inflammatory reaction associated with respiratory problems such as asthma.

It is important to bear in mind that, while antibiotics can prove life-saving in some circumstances, they also alter the numbers and types of bacteria that inhabit the intestinal tract. In short, repeated courses of antibiotics can wipe out the 'good guys' in the gut, which potentially gives some unfriendly microorganisms the upper hand. As we continue to learn more about the importance of maintaining a healthy gut ecology, such an imbalance appears quite harmful.

Giving kids probiotics has also been shown to reduce respiratory tract infections, colic and

irritability, antibiotic use, duration of diarrhea, urinary tract infections, and even dental cavities. Eczema (technically called 'atopic dermatitis') is another condition not uncommon in children, involving itchy and inflamed areas of skin. Atopic dermatitis is actually related to allergy, and just like with the gut-respiratory connection described above, new data is showing a gut-skin connection.

In the not-so-distant future, it is likely that we will see more emphasis placed on the importance of gut probiotics to overall health, both in children and adults. In the meantime, consider asking your child's pediatrician his or her opinion on this matter (just don't be surprised if they give you a funny or quizzical look in response!). Incorporating probiotics can be as simple as adding them to formula, cereal or expressed breast milk for younger children, and for older kids there are children's probiotics on the market.

Probiotics are very safe, with virtually no side-effects. As with any over-the-counter supplement, be sure to do your homework and purchase a reputable brand. Imagine, using 'bugs' to improve your child's health!!

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