Be savvy about probiotics

Nobody talks about probiotics better than Dr Gwee Kok Ann, renowned expert gastroenterologist and consultant to global probiotic food and drug manufacturing companies, and Dr Warren Lee, renowned regional expert on childhood and adolescent growth and metabolic disorders.

Both doctors have co-authored a set of regional guidelines to guide the selection of probiotics for treatment of certain digestive disorders, and they now share about probiotics and their benefits.

What are probiotics?

Strictly speaking, probiotics should only be used to describe living bacteria that can provide health benefits to the consumer. Ideally, the label ‘probiotic’ should only be allowed for products that have good clinical evidence of improving a specific health condition.

Prebiotics are sugars that resist digestion and absorption by the human intestine. When ingested these sugars are supposed to act as food substrates for the bacteria found naturally in the intestine. But available evidence has not provided convincing proof that adding prebiotics to a probiotic formulation provides additional clinical benefit compared with giving the probiotic alone.

What is the importance of probiotics to children and adults?

When a baby is born, the baby is colonised by bacteria from the mother’s birth canal and/or her skin and the surrounding environment. Breast milk contains special sugars which promote the growth of generally beneficial bacteria which help develop the baby’s immune system and modulate the responses to other bacteria and to food antigens. As the child grows up, eventually each individual will have his or her own unique microbiome garden in the body.

Some studies have shown that children consuming specific probiotic products had lower rates of illness in a childcare centre setting than those who did not. However, there is no recommendation for probiotics to be used on a regular basis by people who are well. There is insufficient proof that this will lead to the health benefits claimed by some probiotic manufacturers.

As each individual’s microbiome is unique, certain strains may also work in some individuals but not others.

What conditions are probiotics effective for?

Some purported health benefits include suppression of diarrhoea, protection from intestinal infection and inflammation, alleviation of lactose intolerance, and enhanced absorption of vitamins and other nutrients.

There is evidence that some probiotics may help to improve some of the symptoms in patients with irritable bowel syndrome. Some people may have an improvement in skin conditions like eczema when specific probiotic products are consumed.

But generalisations concerning the potential health benefits of probiotics should not be made because probiotic effects tend to be strain specific. Different outcomes have been observed with different probiotics in different clinical situations, as well as between adult and paediatric patient populations.

How can one make an informed choice about the right probiotics to buy/use?

Our expert panel review of the scientific evidence, concluded that the quality and health claims of probiotics classified as health supplements, are undetermined. Unlike medicines, health supplements here are not assessed for their effectiveness, and may not have efficacy data from stringent clinical trials.

A number of studies whereby scientists would obtain samples of off-the-shelf commercial probiotic products have shown inconsistencies between the content claimed on the label and actual probiotic strain identified.

Probiotics should be treated with the same respect that we give to antibiotics. We should carefully select a probiotic formulation that has been approved by HSA, or else at the very least, it should have actually undergone clinical testing in patients.