

The Benefits of Probiotics for Your Pet

All dogs, cats, humans, and other mammals need a healthy community of beneficial or “friendly” bacteria in the digestive system. These friendly bacteria provide many health benefits, and taking steps to ensure a strong population of these helpers in your pet’s digestive system should be part of normal care for your pet. You can help restore essential friendly bacteria to your pet’s body and give a real boost to health with a probiotic (“friendly bacteria”) diet supplement.

Effects of a Reduced Population of Friendly Bacteria in the Digestive System

To you, it may appear that your dog is simply relaxed, bored, lazy, or just getting old, that the scratching he does is just the way dogs are, or that your cat just doesn’t find playing with his toys that interesting these days. After all, they aren’t puppies or kittens any more. But why is it that some dogs and cats continue to be full of energy even as they grow older? The difference can be in the friendly bacteria in their digestive tracts.

Modern living is designed to be as germ-free as possible. We take precautions to eliminate bacteria from our environment and try to keep our pets from ingesting anything that might contain disease-causing bacteria. Unfortunately, it’s difficult to selectively eliminate only the bad (pathogenic) bacteria without affecting the essential good bacteria at the same time. Studies have shown that animals raised in a completely germ-free environment, without any contact with bacteria, are highly susceptible to infectious diseases when they’re exposed to a normal environment.

Your pet’s digestive system is designed to develop and maintain a healthy balance of friendly bacteria, but this balance can be upset by:

- treatment with antibiotics to combat illness
- fungal overgrowth after illness
- diarrhea from illness or other causes
- dietary imbalance that lacks the nutrients needed to support a healthy population of friendly bacteria
- failure to develop a healthy population of friendly bacteria at birth

A depleted population of friendly bacteria can cause a wide range of far-reaching effects, allowing pathogens to spread and overgrow in the intestinal tract, fungal overgrowth to occur on internal organs and the skin, reduced functionality of the digestive system, compromise of immune system functions, and various other health problems. Pathogens that multiply and spread in the intestines can attack the intestinal wall and cause microinfections, allowing toxins to penetrate the intestinal wall and enter the bloodstream and nervous system to cause a number of serious problems.

Probiotic Supplementation Restores a Healthy Population of Friendly Bacteria in the Digestive System

A symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationship exists between mammals and friendly intestinal bacteria. The term “probiotics” (meaning “for life” in Greek) is used to refer to products containing these live organisms, because they increase the population of friendly intestinal bacteria upon ingestion. A more complete definition of probiotics would be “live microbial supplements that beneficially affect the host by improving intestinal microbial balance.”

Here are some of the benefits probiotics provide:

- increased natural resistance to infectious disease in the gastrointestinal tract and a first line of defense against disease
- prevention of dangerous fungal overgrowth
- reduction or elimination of some allergic reactions
- antibiotic action against certain pathogenic bacteria
- enhanced resistance against viruses
- optimized digestive processes, allowing maximum nutritional benefit from food
- improved resistance to toxic bowel problems
- resistance to diarrhea
- stimulation of the immune system
- improved resistance to food poisoning
- production of needed nutrients, such as vitamin K, one form of which the body itself cannot make
- improved lactose intolerance conditions
- reduction of cholesterol levels
- antioxidants (inhibit the destructive effects of oxidation)
- improved resistance to stress of all kinds
- overall improved quality of life and longevity

There is extensive evidence that the complex friendly bacteria present in the gastrointestinal tract of all mammals are essential in protecting against disease. These protective microbes can be depleted, however, by diet and environment, making the body susceptible to disease and reducing the efficiency of food utilization. The microbial population that generally exists in wild animals is often disrupted when animals are reared in our homes with current approaches to nutrition and disease therapy. Our pets are often exposed to conditions that can deplete beneficial gut flora, but the feeding of probiotics can help restore the natural microflora balance, enabling the animal to return to its inherent and normal condition of nutrition, health, and growth.

Highly toxic substances are produced in the intestinal tract of your pet. This is a normal process, and friendly bacteria protect against most of these toxins, as long as sufficient numbers are on duty. However, if friendly bacteria become depleted, a "toxic bowel" situation can develop, which can send poisons into the rest of the body. The best defense against such attacks by toxins and pathogens is a strong population of friendly bacteria in the intestinal tract, and the ingestion of probiotics provides an effective way to accomplish this.

An important point to understand is that every mammal's intestinal microbial population is unique, just like a fingerprint. The friendly bacteria provided by probiotic supplementation will not exactly match the animal's original intestinal bacteria and therefore cannot permanently replace them. The bacteria provided by supplementation should be viewed as "temporary workers" that perform the duties of the "permanent worker" bacteria until the bacterial population is restored. In most cases, however, the original cause of the microbial depletion will remain and a long-term maintenance level of supplementation will be helpful. Probiotic supplementation should begin at a high dosage and then gradually be reduced to a suitable maintenance level.

In short, probiotics can give a very significant boost to the health and general well-being of most animals, including those that appear "healthy" to us, and can increase stamina, energy level, disease resistance, and overall quality of life. Making probiotics a standard component of the care you give your pet is a great idea.

For further reading:

Note: The articles will open in a new window. Adobe Acrobat Reader is required for some of the articles; it can be downloaded for free at this location: [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#)

Beneficial effects in the use of probiotics in the diet of dogs

<http://jn.nutrition.org/cgi/content/full/128/12/2730S>

Probiotics shown to stimulate immune functions in young dogs

<http://jn.nutrition.org/cgi/content/full/133/4/1158>

Effects of probiotic Lactobacillus acidophilus in healthy adult dogs

<http://avmajournals.avma.org/doi/abs/10.2460/ajvr.2004.65.338>

The use of direct-fed microbials with dogs

<http://www.conklin.com/divisions/files/DFM%20Benefits%20for%20Dogs.pdf>

Use of probiotics to modulate the immune system of newborn dogs and protect against diseases

<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1365-2567.2003.01778.x>

Bacteria in the gut: friends and foes and how to alter the balance

<http://jn.nutrition.org/cgi/content/full/134/8/2022S>

Optimization of cholesterol removal by probiotics

<http://aem.asm.org/cgi/content/full/71/4/1745>

Probiotic research in Australia, New Zealand, and the Asia-Pacific Region (Probiotics targeted to animals feature heavily in many Asian countries.)

<http://bentham.org/cpd/sample/cpd11-1/0006B.pdf>

Study of possible prevention of allergy by the administration of probiotic bacteria

<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1046/j.1365-2222.1999.00560.x>