

## Ask Dr. Weil Probiotics; Flu Shots; Lasers for Pain; and More

**Is it a good idea to occasionally change the type of probiotic I use?**

**I**f you're taking a probiotic to promote digestive health or boost immunity and it works well for you, then stick with it. Immunologist Sheryl Berman, PhD, at Bastyr University in Seattle, says there's no evidence that changing probiotic species or brands merely for variety offers any health benefits. I typically recommend probiotic supplements that contain *Bacillus coagulans* (BC-30) or *Lactobacillus GG*, two strains known to contribute large supplies of healthy bacteria to the intestinal tract. Probiotic supplements come as tablets, capsules, powders, and refrigerated liquids. (For more on probiotics, see the March 2007 issue.)

**What do you suggest for goiter?**

**I**'m not aware of any natural treatments for goiter (an enlarged thyroid gland), and conventional medical approaches vary depending on the symptoms and underlying cause. In any case, it's important to pay close attention to goiter, since hormones produced by your thyroid gland regulate all aspects of metabolism, from the rate your heart beats to the speed you burn calories. If your thyroid is functioning normally, your doctor may suggest doing nothing for your enlarged thyroid. However, if the problem is a thyroid tumor or if your goiter is causing difficulty swallowing or breathing, you may need to consider surgery and other treatment.

**Does aloe juice help acid reflux?**

**I**n no longer recommend *Aloe vera* juice to heal acid reflux and other irritations of the gastrointestinal tract because I think there are better natural treatments. I now suggest slowly chewing two tablets of deglycyrrhizinated licorice (DGL) between or before meals to increase the mucous coating of the esophageal lining and protect it from stomach-acid backwash. Aloe is a member of the lily family, and the plant's thick leaves are filled

with a clear gel that can be made into a sour-tasting juice. A couple of ounces of aloe juice—often sold in bottles at health food stores—might be drunk between or before meals to soothe acid reflux, yet there's little scientific evidence to support its use for this reason. Stomach cramps and diarrhea are two possible side effects of the beverage.

**What is your opinion of drinking Essiac tea to treat cancer?**

**T**his herbal blend appears to be harmless and some lab tests suggest it has anticancer activity, but there's no clinical evidence that Essiac tea offers benefits to cancer patients. Developed in the 1920s, Essiac contains burdock root, Indian rhubarb root, sheep sorrel, and slippery elm, and it's typically drunk one to three times a day. Proponents claim the beverage boosts the immune system's ability to fight off cancer and also reduces the side effects of conventional treatments. Anecdotally, some people who use Essiac as an adjunctive treatment say it makes them feel better, so I don't object to trying the tea. (Reported side effects are nausea and vomiting.) But I certainly wouldn't rely on Essiac as a primary treatment for cancer: Some manufacturers advise against chemotherapy and other conventional treatments when using the tea, which I consider a reckless recommendation.

**Is it true that seniors who get flu shots are more apt to get dementia?**

**N**o. This concern is based on controversial research conducted by Hugh Fudenberg MD, which suggested that seniors who received the flu vaccine five years in a row between 1970 and 1980 were 10 times more likely to develop dementia than those who seldom received vaccinations (*International Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 2000). Dr. Fudenberg claimed that the buildup of thimerosal (a mercury-based preservative) from the flu vaccine led to cognitive dysfunction. But since then, the amount of preservative used in flu vaccines has been reduced to low

levels, and more-recent research has linked annual flu vaccination with a *reduced* risk of dementia. If you're still concerned, ask your doctor about getting a preservative-free vaccine (visit [cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/thimerosal.htm](http://cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/thimerosal.htm) for more information).

**What do you think of hand-held cool-laser therapy to treat pain?**

**C**ool (also called cold) laser therapy may be useful when done by a trained practitioner, but I'd avoid self-treating pain with hand-held laser devices since they may be ineffective unless you know what you're doing. Also called phototherapy, cold-laser treatment is used primarily by physical therapists as an alternative or adjunctive treatment for musculoskeletal injuries and painful conditions. By placing light in contact with damaged tissue, phototherapy in theory stimulates cell function to promote healing. In most cases, it reduces inflammation, making recovery less painful. Unlike thermal lasers, which are hot to the touch, cold lasers are noninvasive and painless. Hand-held devices often cost \$2,000 or more and are not typically covered by health insurance.

**Do you think a daily baby aspirin might contribute to tinnitus?**

**I**t's highly unlikely that taking aspirin at this low dose every day contributes to the ringing or buzzing sounds in the ear known as tinnitus. But this side effect might occur in people who are extremely sensitive to the pain reliever. The active compound in aspirin, a salicylate, can cause tinnitus at higher doses. The only way to know if tinnitus is aspirin related is to stop taking it for a week or so and see if the ringing in the ears lessens or goes away and returns if you resume aspirin therapy. Tinnitus can also be aggravated by wax buildup, an ear or sinus infection, and stress. **EW**

Please send your health questions to Ask Dr. Weil, Self Healing, 42 Pleasant St., Watertown MA 02472.

**fast fact** ▶ Ninety percent of Americans surveyed picked taste over nutrition in their choice of snacks.