

Probiotics with Fur?

By Comfort for Critters

Did you take your probiotics this morning? If your dog woke you up with a "kiss", you just may have! Researchers at the University of Arizona think dogs have a probiotic effect on the gut bacteria of their companions...and that's a great thing!

We all carry about 500 different types of bacteria in our digestive system - both good types and bad. "Probiotics" are the good bacteria, which keep our digestive system healthy and may even boost our immune system. The current trend is to take supplements, or eat certain types of yogurt, to enhance our own set of probiotics, but there may be a better way.

Research has shown that dogs and their household companions develop the same gut bacteria over time. This also happens with people who share the same household. By breathing the same indoor air, sharing the same living space and touching the same surfaces we all exchange microbes. The study hopes to show that when dogs are added to this mix, our microbial life is enhanced. This finding would go a long way to explain other research which shows pets enhance the immune functioning in children and reduce the risk of allergies and asthma.

However, it's not just kids who could benefit. The researchers are keenly interested in determining how exposure to a more varied group of bacteria can help our mental and physical health as we age. The research will probe for positive effects on the gut microflora for sure, but also the mental and emotional well-being of the participants.

Thankfully, the researchers will use shelter dogs from the Humane Society of Southern Arizona. Each study participant will be paired with a dog, to share their home for a period of three months. Periodic follow up evaluations will be done to determine the effect on the gut bacteria and the general well-being of all involved.

If the results suggest that dogs can provide a boost to our good microbes, a boost in shelter adoptions may just result. Many retirement homes and senior living facilities already have "mascots", but this could give them an added incentive to allow even more pets into these facilities. So all around the findings of this research could help pets, seniors and everyone in between!

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