

PRESS RELEASE

Probiotics – are “healthy” bacteria always healthy?

Fatal consequences possible in pancreatitis – Europe’s biggest gastroenterology conference in Vienna presents the latest medical findings

(Vienna, 02 September 2008) Probiotics are used not only as a dietary supplement to strengthen the immune system, but also in clinical practice to reduce the severity and duration of diseases of the gastrointestinal system. However, they are not always helpful. In cases of acute pancreatitis they can even cause fatal complications. This controversial issue will be discussed, together with the findings of thousands of other studies, at the 16th United European Gastroenterology Week (UEGW) in Vienna from 18 to 22 October. Some 12,000 scientists from more than 75 countries are expected at Europe’s biggest conference on the subject.

There are indications of positive therapeutic or preventive effect of certain probiotic strains in some diarrhoea diseases. There are promising results in IBS (irritable bowel syndrome), in ulcerative colitis (Colitis ulcerosa), and also in chronic diseases of the liver. It seems that probiotics at least reduce side effects in combating *Helicobacter pylori* infections in the gastric mucosa. But so far their tremendous popularity has practically no backing from scientific research.

Dangerous in pancreatitis patients

A study from the Netherlands, also to be discussed at the UEGW, now shows that probiotics can even have dangerous consequences. Patients with acute pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) were tube-fed with probiotic cultures to the upper part of the small intestine, as prophylaxis. It was observed that substantially more patients died in the probiotics group than in the group receiving a placebo. This finding went against all the expectations; experts explain that probiotics need to be viewed in a differentiated way.

Many more conference highlights

Alongside the recent research results on diseases of the pancreas and gallbladder, the conference focuses on diseases of the stomach, bowel and liver. It includes subjects affecting millions of people, such as new endoscopic techniques, progress in the treatment of hepatitis and liver cirrhosis, chronic inflammatory bowel disease, and disorders of the oesophagus.

First-hand information for journalists

Journalists can use the 16th United European Gastroenterology Week in Vienna as an opportunity to get expert first-hand information on the latest developments in health policy issues. Interview partners will be available at the press conferences and at the specially established press centre. Further conference information and the complete conference programme are available from the website <http://uegw08.uegf.org/>

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