Fecal Transplants to Make You Healthy?

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The notion of transplanting fecal matter from one individual's colon to another's in order to improve the health of the latter may seem repulsive and barbaric, but the technique is being used more and more widely to treat a spectrum of human ailments. It is not new however. Its origins are traceable to 4th century A.D. China and in Western medicine, from the late 1950's. But before you get completely turned off to the idea, remember that pre and pro-biotics also contain bacterial strains commonly used to improve health.

Fecal transplantation involves taking fecal matter from a healthy, strictly-screened donor, washing it, removing solid elements and waste and retaining only the bacterial flora which are then suspended in sterile water or diluted milk and implanted into the colon of the recipient via the rectum, via nasogastric (nose>stomach) tube or a capsule taken orally. Attention is now being turned to baby feces as babies are far less likely to carry disease.

I first became aware of fecal transplantation (aka bacteriotherapy) when attending a symposium on psychoneuroimmunology in Philadelphia several years back where some of the presentations/discussions concerned research done on "the microbiome" of the human body --- trillions of microscopic bacteria living on us and inside us, flourishing in almost every compartment of our bodies in numerous strains. We are made up of much more than blood, skin, cells, bones, muscles, organs and glands. Not all bacteria are bad and some are crucial to our health.

I recall one speech delivered by a research scientist who conducted experiments on "clean lab mice". These mice are bred and maintained in covered tanks to be free of any contamination. The hypothesis was essentially this: The "microbiome" (tiny bacterial world) inside us is connected to immune system health. In the experiment, the researcher merely took the mice out of isolation and exposed the mice to the environment. The mice quickly became sick.

"Why is that?" Because the mice had never been exposed to any bacteria, viruses or allergens in the environment, they developed no immune systems! After being given the fecal transplantation, the mice began to recover. This demonstrated the lack of a microbiome in the clean mice left them immunologically defenseless, and introducing foreign bacteria-rich fecal matter into the mice built their immune systems and allowed them to recover.

"But we are not 'clean mice'! We have immune systems! Why would one ever need a fecal transplant?" Well, many people may have taken antibiotics throughout their lifetimes and/or have had very bad diets. Many antibiotics attack all cells, good and bad, having the effect of strip-mining the gut, killing off the good and allowing bad bacteria to take over. Also, a diet limited to processed, inorganic foods does not introduce new, beneficial microbial life into the body. In either case this leads to imbalances in the bacteria necessary to maintain good health and sets the stage for autoimmune illnesses of the gut like Crohn's disease, IBS or ulcerative colitis and the inflammatory arthritis that often accompany them. *Clostridium difficile* colitis tends to recur after a course of antibiotics 20-60% of the time, but after a fecal transplant recovery is 90% successful (Johns Hopkins).

This technique should not be self-administered as there are risks of blood infection (sepsis). Inquiries should be made to a qualified administrator of this technique. Fecal transplants are being looked at to aid in other areas such as obesity, diabetes, cancers, mood and autism.

Are there foods one should consume to increase healthy bacteria? Yes. PRE-biotocs: asparagus, artichokes, honey, real maple syrup and red wine feed the good bacteria. PRO-biotics: yogurt, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, pickles, buttermilk and cheeses like gouda, mozzarella, cheddar and cottage cheese contain the good bacteria.

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