The gut feeling: understanding probiotics and prebiotics

At VetHQ, the veterinarians get asked about probiotics at least once daily. So, I thought I would give an update on what we recommend.

The benefits of probiotics have been long recognised in human health. Recently, the role of prebiotics, which work in synergy with probiotics, has also gained attention. And now we can use these safely in our pets, but let's explore how to do this.

What are prebiotics and probiotics?

Probiotics are beneficial microorganisms, primarily bacteria and yeast, that when consumed in adequate amounts, confer health benefits for the host. For our pets, probiotics are used to maintain or restore a healthy balance of gut bacteria, which can be disrupted by illness, diet or medication.

Prebiotics are non-digestible fibres that serve as food for these beneficial bacteria. They help stimulate the growth and activity of probiotics in the gut, enhancing their effectiveness.

What are the benefits of probiotics and prebiotics for my pet?

1. **Digestive health:** Probiotics improve gastrointestinal function by promoting a healthy balance of gut flora, helping manage and preventative digestive disorders such as diarrhoea and inflammatory bowel disease. Prebiotics support this by feeding the healthy bacteria, enhancing their growth and activity.
2. **Immune support:** a healthy gut is crucial for a strong immune system. Pro and prebiotics can enhance the gut's immune responses, helping to prevent infection and illnesses.
3. **Nutrient absorption:** By improving the balance of bacteria in the gut there can be beneficial effects for digestion and absorption of nutrients.
4. **Allergy management:** pro and prebiotics may modulate the immune system and reduce inflammatory responses.

5. **Mental health:** Emerging research suggests a link between gut health and behaviour. This may help with mental and emotional regulation.

Choosing the right probiotic and prebiotic

When selecting these supplements for your pet, please consider the following factors:

- Species specific strains: the product must be formulated to suit your pet, as their gut flora differs from humans.
- CFU count: Colony-forming units (CFUs) indicate the number of live microorganisms in a probiotic product, look for a product with at least 1 billion CFUs.
- Delivery method: these supplements come in various forms such as powders, capsules and chews. Select a form that will suit your pet.
- Storage requirements: some require refridgeration, others are fine on the shelf.

Potential risks and side effects

We recommend a gradual introduction to probiotics as some animals experience some mild digestive upsets when first introduced, such as gas or diarrhoea.

Before starting a new supplement always consult your veterinarian to receive guidance on the appropriate product, dosage and duration of requirement based on your pet's specific health.

FAQ

Q: Can I give my pet human prebiotics and probiotics?

A: Always chose products suitably formulated for your pet, as human's gut flora is different to theirs.

Q: How long does it take for pre or probiotics to work in pets?

A: The effects can vary, but many pets show an improvement within a few days or weeks. For chronic conditions it may take longer to observe significant benefits.

Q: Can I just feed my pet a spoonful of yoghurt instead?

A: The levels of probiotic bacteria provided by a tablespoon of yoghurt are much lower than what animals would get from a probiotic supplement. Even a full tub of yoghurt would be unlikely to deliver the 1 billion CFUs, whereas one dose of probiotic would, and without the extra calories. Be aware that some pets may not be able to tolerate lactose.