

GETTING OUR GUT INSIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH JO ANN HATTNER RD, MPH

You have a background as a Registered Dietitian. What inspired you to dive into probiotics?

My clinical years were spent primarily as a pediatric nutrition specialist in the Gastroenterology Clinic at Stanford, there I learned science-based practice from my mentor Dr. John Kerner, pediatric gastroenterologist.

I was introduced to probiotics through the work of two gastroenterologists who specialized in pediatrics: Dr. Jose Saavedra at Johns Hopkins and Dr. Alan Walker at Harvard. I still quote both of them when I do a presentation.

I dove into probiotics as a result of numerous products with probiotics entering the US marketplace. I had some experience with these products in Europe and I was happy to see them in the US, so I was always checking to see what was new. One day, as I stood in front of the cold case looking at the products which contained “cultured milk” or “active cultures”, I thought, the consumer probably does not know what these are and why they are there.

I have an MPH from Berkeley and my studies were supported with a government grant. I have always felt a responsibility to interpret my “Ivory Tower Knowledge” from Stanford for the public. So, I authored my book [Gut Insight: Probiotics and Prebiotics for Digestive Health and Well-being](#) primarily for the consumer, but also for the health professional.

As a nutritionist, I focused on food. I wanted it based in science so I recruited medical librarian Susan Anderes, MLIS, with whom I worked with while teaching nutrition to medical students at Stanford.



What information was available to clinicians/public when you started your practice?

The early science on probiotics was available if you searched for it and because I frequently attended and participated in nutrition meetings where I was exposed to the science and to the investigators. Some of the very early clinical work was done by gastroenterologists. I was of course fascinated that you could use a bacterial strain for the prevention of diarrhea in infants.

How has the information available changed as probiotics have gotten more popular?

Investigators and their findings are much more available to the public as they are frequently featured in articles, interviewed for podcasts or you can find their presentations on You-Tube. In addition, there are many “lay” books on the subject, written by scientists. For example, the Sonnenburgs’ book *The Good Gut* comes to mind.



What are some myths and misconceptions about probiotics that you hear often?

That a supplement will solve my health problems and the more variety of probiotics it contains the better.
That fermented foods always contain probiotics because they are fermented.
I was even asked by a journalist if a probiotic is first a prebiotic that then becomes a probiotic.

What are some barriers or challenges you have seen/heard/experienced in the field of probiotics for both clinicians and patients?

Understanding a balanced gut ecosystem and what it means to human health. Understanding probiotic classification and the importance of strain identification. Understanding that probiotics need scientific research which demonstrates a health benefit in humans.



How do you initiate the conversation with your patients about probiotics and the benefits, especially with the overwhelming amount of information available on the internet/blogs/news?

I remind them that there are experts and there are people with opinions, many of whom have no credentials which qualify them for making recommendations. I discuss the importance of the microbiome, what it is and how it affects human health. Probiotics are then a natural part of the discussion. I discuss clinical trials and the use of probiotics backed by reputable science. I may share with them my experience as a primary investigator in a clinical trial on irritable bowel syndrome in San Francisco. And of course, I use the [Probiotic Guide](#) to guide them on how to select a probiotic.



As someone with a focus on public health, do you see probiotics rising to a more prominent position in the future, beyond just individual gut health?

Certainly! Every day, I read about a new discovery involving a human organ that is influenced by the microbiome. Many conditions are now being studied to ascertain if they can be treated with microbiome

additions, balancing, or manipulations. I think treating chronic debilitating diseases is of great promise. I am hoping that we will achieve this in the near future and these treatments will come to fruition.



Jo Ann Hattner MPH, RDN has over thirty years of experience primarily at Stanford University Medical Center where she focused on pediatric gastroenterology and medical student education. Since 2008, she has managed a nutrition consulting business in San Francisco.

Probiotics and prebiotics are her expertise. To share her knowledge, she wrote her book [Gut Insight: Probiotics and Prebiotics for Digestive Health and Well-being](#) with her colleague Susan Anderes, a medical librarian. She presents at professional meetings of dietitians and health professionals on the topics of prebiotics and probiotics. Jo Ann’s teaching and writing conveys her belief that “gut health improves overall health.”

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