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# Arthritis Tied to Gut Bacteria

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**By: Nick Tate**

A growing body of research is focusing on a surprising culprit in the cause of rheumatoid arthritis: the bacteria that live in our guts.

The truth is that doctors aren't entirely sure what triggers the disease, in which the body turns on itself to attack the joints. But several recent studies have found intriguing links between gut microbes, rheumatoid arthritis, and other immune system disorders, [The Atlantic](#) reports.

In new research published in 2013 New York University rheumatologist by Jose Scher found that rheumatoid arthritis sufferers were much more likely to have a bug called *Prevotella copri* in their intestines than non-sufferers and patients with psoriatic arthritis had significantly lower levels of other types of gut bacteria.

Scher is one of the nation's leading researchers attempting to determine how the microbiome —the various microbes that live in the gastrointestinal tract — affects our overall health, and how to use the gut as a way to target disease.

"This is frontier stuff," says Scher, director of NYU's Microbiome Center for Rheumatology and Autoimmunity. "This is a shift in paradigm. By including the microbiome, we've added a new player to the game."

"It's become more and more clear that these microbes can affect the immune system, even in diseases that are not in the gut," says Veena Taneja, an immunologist at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, whose own research has also linked gut bacteria to rheumatoid arthritis.

Scientists are increasingly focusing on how gut bacteria influence the immune system. Studies show the rate of autoimmune diseases is rising, and some scientists believe that may be due, in part, to changes in gut bacteria tied to unhealthy diets, the explosion of antibiotic use, and even anti-bacteria products.

"Our microbiome has changed significantly over the past century, and especially over the past 50 years," says NYU microbiologist Martin Blaser, who puts much of the blame on widespread use of antibiotics. "We're losing microbes with each generation; they are going extinct. These changes have consequences."

"These organisms are part of our developmental choreography. They're part of who we are."

Some alternative medicine practitioners believe products that contain "healthy bacteria" — such as yogurt, aged cheeses, and other foods that have probiotics or prebiotics — can help counteract health problems by boosting healthy gut bacteria and, by extension, the immune system.

Right now, doctors aren't using microbes in patients to treat arthritis or other conditions, but Scher expects that to change.

“In 10 or 15 years I think the microbiome will be a key therapeutic option for some of these diseases,” he says. “There will be challenges, but I don’t see why it can’t happen. This isn’t science fiction.”

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