

Today's food fad is to do good by your gut

Intestinal health is the focus. It's a successor to the oat bran craze, to Vitamin E, soy and green tea.

By Cheryl Truman

McCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

LEXINGTON, Ky. — It's not all in your head. These days, it's all in your gut.

Twenty years ago, oat bran was the food that was going to put us all in a state of high-fiber, clear-hearted bliss.

Now the food trend is lower in the body. You want to be healthy in 2008? Ponder your intestines.

Dannon sells Activia yogurt, which promotes bathroom regularity. It also hawks mini-smoothies called DanActive that claim to boost immunity. You didn't know? Much of your immunity lies in the foot after foot of epithelial cells lining your intestines — a kind of spongy exchange center where nutrients are absorbed and wastes are expelled.

Kraft sells "probiotic" cheese and cottage cheese. Planters has introduced a "digestive health mix" that includes "prebiotic" high-fiber items including granola, almonds and dried cherries.

There's even a new book called *Health Begins in the Colon* (Ulysses Press), by Edward Group. Says Group of his epiphanic moment: "I never hear anything in the medical community about the intestinal tract."

Group says part of our problem, not to put too fine a point on it, is transit time: how long it takes for what you ingest to do its body business and exit you. An ideal transit time for food to get in, break down, and be on its way? Ten to 18 hours.

That's the other part of the intestinal-health equation: urging the toxins in our food to move on out. Or, with Group's dietary recommendations, never eating them in the first place. He doesn't lie laxatives — which he says are drugs — or even psyllium, which he says doesn't repair or cleanse the colon but instead scrapes the intestinal walls a

little. He prefers an oxygen-based colon cleanse followed by a diet low in junk and high in fruit.

Then there's Dannon's method of colon overhaul.

Dannon has touted the health benefits of its yogurt as far back as the iconic 1970s commercials that promoted the long-lived yogurt-eating Russian Georgians. Now, Dannon has added biotically charged yogurts that produce a benefit — but only if you continue eating them. "You have to consume these products regularly," Dannon spokesman Michael Neuwirth said. "It's not an on-off switch."

Whether a product is on or off the good-food list; of course, depends on the consumer. And that's where food fads, as much fashion as science, start.

James Anderson of the University of Kentucky saw the boom and bust of his favored grain 20 years ago.

One day, oat bran was being added to seemingly every product on the grocery shelf because of its heart-healthy properties. Anderson was dubbed Dr. Oat Bran for his role in popularizing oat bran.

Then, in January 1990, oat bran plummeted from favor. The New England Journal of Medicine said that it wasn't any more effective than wheat fiber. Both worked by displacing other items in the diet. And oat bran caused diarrhea and bloating. And that was the moment, the dull thunk, that killed oat bran.

Oat bran's fate was less about eating healthy and more about getting the cool food of the moment. In 1988, that was an oat bran muffin. Now it's anything containing omega-3 oils or probiotics.

In between, there were superfoods to enthuse about, buy and abandon, among them Vitamin E, beta carotene, soy, green tea and "fat-free" formulations that as the food-villain focus shifted, morphed

into "low-carb" foodstuffs.

Why do consumers think they need to flit among foods? Part of the blame gets tossed into the vast blame pit known as journalism: A

1994 New England Journal of Medicine article by Marcia Angell and Jerome Kassirer argued that reporters and the public were complicit in seeking easy, definitive, permanent answers from scientists who don't have them.

Christine Gerbstadt, a registered dietitian and doctor who works with the American Dietetic Association, knows that the consistent message put forward by her organization — eat a varied diet, exercise, and maintain a restrained lifestyle — doesn't resonate with consumers the way food fads do.

We don't like complexity and fluid knowledge. We want to live longer, and we have little patience with complicated ideas about how to achieve that: They're boring.

We want our prescription for health to be peppy, easy, and available in a word — two at most.

Hence: "oat bran," "low fat," "low carb." And now, "digestive health."

Beth Loiselle, who offers nutritional counseling and is the author of *The Healing Power of Whole Foods* (HealthWays Nutrition), urges clients to eat more whole grains, cut back on sugar, and make sure they eat some protein with each meal. Loiselle believes in "real food" with as little processing as possible, and lots of vegetables.

