

It's A Small World After All: A New Perspective on Microorganisms

By Dr. Reema Sayegh

Let's face it. When most of us hear the word "microorganism" we mentally crinkle our noses, as our minds tend to think of the pathogenic varieties, commonly referred to as microbes. I know I have been guilty of this, especially when I was growing up. Back then it was commonplace to view all microscopic life forms as Public Enemy Numbers One, and Two, and Three, etc. We were programmed to believe that all types of bacteria, viruses, and fungi were to be avoided at all costs, and should be eradicated.



In fact, I came across a series of numerically labeled Polaroid pictures the other day that illustrate this very idea. (A note to younger readers: Google 'Polaroid' and see what comes up – lol!) I had to laugh when I looked at them. I was 18 months old, and sitting on the floor of our balcony. In picture number one, I was happily playing in the spilled soil of one of our potted plants. In picture number two, my mother appeared in the corner of the frame, hand outstretched. In picture number three, my mother was frowning, standing beside me, trying to pick me up while I looked confused. In picture number four, my mother had me in her arms, and my dirty hands were wrapped around her neck, with clumps of soil holding fast to the back of her sweater collar. I appeared to be bawling my fool head off, devastated that I had been so rudely interrupted, and whisked away from my filth fun.

Although there were no more pictures to prove it, I am certain I was immediately de-clothed, and subsequently scrubbed to a squeaky, sterile-like clean, then monitored closely for 24-48 hours to ensure I did not “break with Typhus, Tetanus or Tularemia.”

Fast forward to today and it seems it's still an uphill battle to overcome this deeply rooted “cootie phobia.” My mother and I were sitting in her rheumatologist's office the other day, and I felt myself physically recoil and mash against my mother's side when a nearby patient started to cough spasmodically. I tried to quickly sit up straight again, yet felt my mother tug on my shirtsleeve in an effort to pull me closer to her. I smiled politely at her, and whispered my borrowed Beauchamp mantra, “Remember ma, it's not the microbe, it's the host.” She wasn't having it as she flashed me that familiar look and muttered something about being in the middle of a germ farm.

In a way, my mother is right. We are in the middle of a great big germ farm. Microbes and microorganisms alike are all around us, even on us and in us, all the time. Some of these life forms are unimaginably ancient, and can be found in the farthest corners of space; the deepest, darkest parts of the oceans; in and under meters-thick layers of polar ice; in common garden soil

– on average numbering between 100 million and 3 billion per gram!; in the air: in ponds, lakes and rivers; on our eyelashes; in our noses; in our guts; in our belly buttons, armpits and spaces between our toes – you get it, like Savoir Faire, these spirochetes, cocci, flagellae, yeasts and other small, unseen friends are everywhere!

Although I do not have human children, I have a larger-than-life canine fur-child who, much like a human child, comes in constant contact with cooties. As I write this, Dakota is lounging on his back patio cot after our lunchtime walk. He is on his back, all four legs akimbo, and I notice his less-than-pristine paw pads. When Dakota was a puppy, I felt the need to subject my tall drink of spindly-legged water to a thorough pad cleaning every time we got back home from a walk. I would crawl to his side, splay his toes, and search every nook and cranny. By the time he was three, I was wiping the pads once a day. Now that Dakota is eight, if I get to his feet once a week, we're lucky – unless they smell somewhat "breadly" and I reach for the coconut oil and apple cider vinegar. Yet still, when I look at Dakota's enormous paws, I am reminded of the stuff he may step on during this daily amble through SoCal suburbia. In a mere 20 minutes, we encounter a myriad of plant pollens, moldy leaves, rabbit and mouse droppings (left hither and yon by the wild, wandering neighborhood opportunists who love this fall's fruit tree yields), mushrooms, and after irrigation, the occasional puddle of water. So basically, all classes of microorganisms are fairly and equally represented.

On weekends, when we venture a mere two hours away from our pretty little neighborhood into exurbia, we are potentially exposed to everything from giardia lamblia to blastomycosis to tapeworms, roundworms and hookworms; to yersinia pestis (read: plague). During these precious outings, Dakota splashes through puddles, romps in rivers, clambers out of dusty desert arroyos; investigates coyote and cougar scat; dives head-first into critter holes (thankfully, he never emerges with anything in his mouth but dirt!); and reluctantly, ever-so-slowly and mournfully, walks up to the car for the trip home. We brush him off, along with our footwear, check everyone for any visible six-legged hitchhikers, and wind down the week with smiles and contented sighs.

On Mondays, I take to the front and back yards, mowing, edging, hand weeding (what shows from the street!), and removing the toadstools that sprout up from the soil between pieces of bark. What I don't do is rake up the grass cuttings. What began as sheer laziness has proven to be an eco-friendly practice of non-toxic lawn fertilization, proper soil balance, and critical moisture retention. According to my Mr. Green Jeans neighbor, and those friendly folks at the local garden store, the lawn is healthy and happy this way. And it's still pretty green, despite the mandated once-weekly 15-minute irrigation restrictions. Perfect for Dakota's daily rolls! And all that good chlorophyll serves as Mother Nature's deodorizer, keeping Dakota smelling and looking green and clean. What a win-win.

While I can't yet claim permanent victory over his ongoing Candida challenges, I endeavor to keep Dakota's overgrowth episodes few and far between in many ways. I start by feeding him a homemade, balanced whole-food diet that features rotated human-grade animal proteins, low-glycemic index vegetables and sometimes berries, varied seeds, and sardines in times of plenty

and sardine oil when times are tight. (Remember, he is part Great Dane! That's a lot of sardines, folks!)

Supporting the Good Gut Guys with probiotics enhances this strong food foundation. To ease his digestive burden, Dakota also gets digestive enzymes. When he gets "burpy" and/or gassy, or starts to scratch his ears a bit, he'll get some detoxifying herbs like dandelion, and a dash more of that apple cider vinegar and coconut oil.

This past summer was a nightmare for many of Dakota's furry friends and their parents. It was hazy, hot and humid for nearly four months (a sad example of our precious planet's climate change), and Dakota's veterinarian said it had been a record year for allergies. Dakota thrives in colder, drier weather, so I knew it would be a challenge to stay ahead of the game. When things got kind of dicey, out came the bigger guns: colloidal silver sprays, and short, pulsed doses of immune boosting echinacea and goldenseal. We managed to evade Dakota's scratching himself bald in spots – much resembling a cheetah, chewing the fur off his toes (as he had done the summer before) and developing subsequent secondary bacterial skin infections. Dakota's coat stayed shiny and soft – thanks in no small part to all that coconut and sardine oil, and the cooler fall weather finally arrived. In mid-November. Sigh.

Now we can begin to rebuild, repair, re-balance and restore the vital immune system of this beloved four-legged host in an effort to give Dakota all the support he needs in order to peacefully coexist with the many microbes with whom we share space in our beloved small world.



About Dr. Reema Sayegh:

Dr. Reema Sayegh has a Ph.D. in holistic nutrition and doctor of naturopathy degree, and has enjoyed an extensive career in the wellness field. After she met, and rescued, a nine-year old Great Dane named Zeus in 2004, Dr. Reema was inspired to "shift gears" and has since become a Reiki master teacher, certified holistic pet consultant, published author, public speaker, and animal welfare advocate. She works in tandem with holistic veterinarians and their clients to provide their companion animals with supplemental natural wellness modalities, and specialty geriatric and hospice care. Dr. Reema lives in southern California with her husband and the love of their lives: a spirited canine teacher, healer, and fun-loving goofball named Dakota.