

# understanding probiotics

Probiotics—healthy bacteria that live in your gut—are being touted as treatments for conditions ranging from tummy troubles to colds. Could they be right for your family?

by Rachel Rabkin Peachman

If you take a holistic approach to your family's health, chances are you've noticed the increase in probiotic supplements on drugstore shelves that claim to do things like alleviate digestive issues and boost immunity. Perhaps your primary care physician or pediatrician has even suggested that you or your child take a probiotic supplement daily. While many people are intrigued by probiotics, confusion about how they're helpful—and if you should be taking them—still remains.

## WHAT ARE PROBIOTICS?

Though we tend to think of bacteria as a bad thing, there are actually many strains of good bacteria (and other friendly microorganisms such as yeast) called probiotics that live mostly in our gut, where 70 percent of our immune system is located. These beneficial microorganisms colonize our digestive tract, our urinary and genital systems, and our skin—collectively they make up what is called the human microbiota, or microbiome. It helps us digest food, synthesize nutrients, and fend off illness, among other things. To function properly, this intricate community of bacteria needs to remain in balance. Unfortunately, when our bodies are confronted with negative influences such as stress, lack of sleep, unhealthy eating, infections, antibiotics, and the chronic use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen, this system can get thrown off balance and trigger digestive problems and illness. That's where supplemental probiotics come in—available in pill and powder forms, and naturally present in fermented foods like yogurt and kefir. "When there is an imbalance, probiotics are helpful," says Henri Roca, M.D., a family physician at Greenwich Integrative Medicine, and medical director of the Integrative Medicine Program at Greenwich Hospital, part of the Yale New Haven Health System in Greenwich, Connecticut. "Probiotics communicate with the bacteria that are living in the body—the good and the bad—and keep that bacteria in check, restore balance, and promote health."



## THE PROS OF PROBIOTICS

Because of the benefits of these friendly bugs, probiotics are one of the most hotly studied new areas of research. A review of clinical trials in the *Journal of Clinical Gastroenterology* states that certain strains of probiotics have been shown to be effective in preventing and treating diarrhea (infectious and antibiotic-related), particularly in children. That's why many doctors now suggest that when taking antibiotics (which kill off bad and good bacteria in the gut, often resulting in digestive upset and diarrhea), you should also take probiotics. Other research published in *Pediatrics* shows that probiotics may help reduce cold and flu symptoms in young children. Another study in the journal *Clinical & Experimental Allergy* found that mothers who took probiotics late in pregnancy and while nursing, and who gave their children probiotics until they were 2 years old, reduced their children's risk of developing eczema and allergies. Still more research shows that specific strains of probiotics may help alleviate irritable bowel syndrome, ease colic in infants, and reduce bad cholesterol in adults. Probiotics and prebiotics (carbohydrates that stimulate the growth of probiotics) have been shown to be so useful in boosting immunity in babies that they are now added to infant formula in an effort to help match the natural probiotic content of breast milk. The list of possible benefits goes on. "Probiotics are about the safest, most useful nutritional supplement in all areas of health care that I can think of," says Michael Wald, M.D., N.D., director of Nutritional Services at Integrated Medicine of Mount Kisco, in New York.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO CONSIDER

Though probiotics are proving to be full of potential, there

is still a lot that experts have yet to learn about them. “Most practitioners are not aware of the varied uses of probiotics,” says Wald, who recommends a daily combo of supplemental probiotics to everyone—even people who are healthy—to help offset environmental stressors that disrupt the balance of our body’s microbiota. Roca, on the other hand, says not everyone should take probiotics: “It isn’t that everyone needs to be on probiotics. If a person has a history of antibiotic use or another condition, then perhaps, but the actual data on prophylactically treating people with probiotics is not compelling—it’s not justified,” he says.

Another area of contention among experts—and confusion among consumers—is the strain and dosage of probiotics needed. “Consumers need to start pressing health care professionals about which probiotic strain is right for them—and what dosage—so that we can increase the quality of the advice being given about probiotics,” says Kelly Tappenden, Ph.D., R.D., endowed professor of human nutrition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “Otherwise people end up wandering the drugstore without any idea which strain or product will help them.”

When it comes to dosages, probiotics are measured by the number of live organisms (cells) present—or colony forming units (CFU)—and suggested dosages can range from 1 billion CFU (or cells) to 450 billion CFU, depending on the individual and the condition being addressed. There is no one-size-fits-all dosage recommendation. “We would never give someone an antibiotic in general without specifying the type and dosage. The same should hold true for probiotics, but, unfortunately, we aren’t to the point where people are being as specific with probiotics,” says Tappenden. Your best bet, then, is to find an integrative medical professional or naturopathic physician who is knowledgeable about probiotics and can help you figure out which one may be right for you and your family. ●

Though you should talk to your practitioner first, here is a short list of well-known brands:



**ESSENTIAL FORMULA**  
(\$29 for 30 ct,  
[drohira.com](http://drohira.com))



**RENEW LIFE**  
(\$15 for 30 ct,  
[renewlife.com](http://renewlife.com))



**NATROL BIOBEADS**  
(\$14 for 30 ct,  
[kiwishoponline.com](http://kiwishoponline.com))



**CULTURELLE**  
(\$34 for 30 ct,  
[kiwishoponline.com](http://kiwishoponline.com))

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