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## Probiotics are bacteria's good guys

### Probiotics can help ward off ailments, making them bacteria's good guys

#### Staff and wire reports

No doubt you've heard of antibiotics, lifesaving drugs that kill off the bad bacteria that cause disease. But not all the bacteria that dwell in our bodies aim to harm. Probiotics, or good bacteria, can help even a healthy immune system thrive and improve general digestive health, experts say.

These days, probiotics, also available in capsules or supplements, are cropping up in a range of foods available at your grocery store — from yogurts to cereals. In August, Nestle introduced Good Start, the country's first baby formula with probiotics. Some granola bars, skin-care products and even dog food boast of probiotics.

"Probiotics is not a fad," says Gary Huffnagle, an immunologist at the University of Michigan and author of *The Probiotics Revolution* (Bantam, \$24). "It's a new scientific concept about how the body works."

Research suggests that probiotics may enhance the immune system and help improve our daily digestive health.

Studies have shown that they can protect against certain forms of diarrhea, colitis, urinary tract infections, irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn's disease. Probiotics may also help treat kidney stones, ulcers and allergies. Some argue they protect against colorectal cancer and colds and lower cholesterol.

But current research of probiotics still leaves many unanswered questions, says Dr. Ashok Shah, professor of medicine in the Gastroenterology and Hepatology Unit at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

"Probiotics have value, but how much value is still not certain," he says.

First, the studies he sees lack double-blind control trials. Second, there is much work to be done to determine which bacteria to use in what concentration and how much is needed to be healthy.

In his own practice, Shah has found probiotics to be helpful in treating selective patients, such as those with pouchitis, a condition that can follow a colectomy and J-pouch surgery. (These procedures are usually done for chronic ulcerative colitis and familial polyposis coli.) Shah also says probiotics can be somewhat effective for irritable bowel syndrome and recurrent and resistant antibiotic-induced colitis.

While research points to probiotics' usefulness in some conditions, Jean Bauch, manager of Unity's Diabetes, Nutrition and Weight Management Center in Rochester, is wary when manufacturers make claims about probiotics improving immunity.

"It is being investigated, but I don't think anyone is out there saying there is a direct correlation, except some manufacturers," she says.

As far as boosting immunity, Bauch stresses the importance of overall good health habits such as hand-washing, getting plenty of rest and daily exercise, and eating a balanced diet.

Still, consumers are pursuing whatever benefits probiotics may have.

Eva Simcoe of Indianapolis is a convert to probiotics' benefits. About a year ago, the mother of two found *The Body Ecology Diet* (Body Ecology, \$8.95) by Donna Gates, which advocates probiotics.

Now Simcoe ferments her own vegetables, yogurt and coconut kefir — all rich sources of probiotics. It's time-consuming, says Simcoe, but worth it. Since she started the diet, she stopped having the yeast infections that used to plague her, and her husband's acid reflux disappeared.

Not everyone, however, invests so much time.

Some turn to supplements, others to yogurt products for their share of probiotics. A profusion of products has come on the market, promoting probiotic content, including Yoplait's Yo-Plus brand of yogurt and Kraft's LiveActive brand of cheese. Kashi has started selling Vive, a cereal with probiotics, while Attune offers wellness bars that boast more probiotics than yogurt.

Experts say that all of us may benefit from a daily dose of probiotics. But no one knows the best way to get them.

"That's the million-dollar question right now," says Dr. Mark Corkins, co-director of nutrition support at Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis and an associate professor of pediatrics at the Indiana University School of Medicine. "This field is very much in its infancy."

In cases where probiotics might be helpful, Bauch recommends trying foods first. If you don't see results, then perhaps try a supplement.

Experts say in order to be effective, a product with probiotics must deliver billions of live bacteria.

Before processed foods and mass refrigeration, most people's diets contained natural probiotics. But now our foods have fewer bacteria, both good and bad. Consuming probiotics ups our load of friendly bugs, which also help keep their evil cousins from multiplying.

"I think it is beneficial for everybody," says Bonnie Cronin, a naturopathic doctor who practices in Canandaigua and Brighton.

When needed, she usually recommends a combination of food and supplements.

As far as taking too many probiotics, "There is a small percentage (of people) that is sensitive to them when they start using them, and it could cause bloating until the body is acclimated," Cronin says.

*Includes reporting by staff writer Karen Miltner and The Indianapolis Star.*

**Probiotic tips**

If you are considering a probiotic product, check these key things on the label:

- Amount of probiotics. Recommended daily doses range from 1 billion to 10 billion colony-forming units.
- Whether there are live bacteria. Dead bacteria do not help you — make sure the label says the product contains live bacteria. Probiotics can get killed by sugar, says Jodi Smith, a Brownsburg, Ind., nutritionist, so sweetened yogurts that boast of probiotics may not be your best bet. "The key is not how much is in it; the key is how much of it is alive."
- <90,-10>Whether the strain of probiotics is right for you. Because some of probiotics' beneficial results may be strain-specific — that is, different kinds of bacteria may work better at treating certain symptoms or diseases — check to make sure that the product that interests you has a strain that's been tested for the issue you want it to address.

You can look up the strain on [www.pubmed.gov](http://www.pubmed.gov).

Or you can check the products' Web sites for more information — for instance, [www.activia.com](http://www.activia.com) and [www.yoplus.com](http://www.yoplus.com) include a list of references on studies that have been done. Some studies are funded by the companies themselves, but at least you can see what the claims are.

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