

The Power of Probiotics



Probiotics are a good idea if you've just finished a course of antibiotics, are experiencing stress or digestive distress, or you've recently deviated from your clean-eating routine.

For better health, listen to your gut. BY PEGGY HALL

At the risk of sounding like a late-night infomercial, let me ask: Have you been feeling run-down lately? Do you suffer from diarrhea, constipation, gas or bloating? Are you susceptible to allergies or asthma? Do you get frequent colds or sore throats? Are you prone to yeast infections? Does your diet include sugar, processed carbs or alcohol? Have you ever taken antibiotics? If you answered “yes” to even one of these questions, then have I got news for you: Your intestines may be overrun by harmful bacteria, resulting in poor digestion, a weakened immune system and a host of other related ills.

“The bacteria in our intestines help with digestion and influence the overall balance and harmony of the body,” says David Katz, MD, founder and director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University School of Medicine. “The right balance of these bacteria – which outnumber the cells in your body by about 20 to one – is crucial to normal, healthy metabolism.”

What goes on inside your gut

When you eat, your body secretes digestive enzymes and gastric juices to begin the complex process of converting food into energy. Most nutrients are absorbed in the small intestine, and friendly bacteria are essential in keeping this environment healthy. But stress, illness, aging, certain medications, inadequate fiber intake and poor nutrition (especially excess sugar and starchy foods) can weaken the digestive process and allow unhealthy bacteria to thrive. When the bad bugs are ruling the roost, the good guys can't get their work done, and that means that even if you're eating well, you may

WHAT CAUSES THE OVER-GROWTH OF BAD BACTERIA?

- Sugar and refined carbohydrates
- Lack of dietary fiber
- Antibiotics (either prescribed or those found in meat and milk)
- Antacids
- Stress
- Birth control pills
- Alcohol
- Low levels of hydrochloric acid in the stomach (hypochlorhydria)

FOODS THAT CONTAIN OR PROMOTE BENEFICIAL BACTERIA:

- Yogurt
- Miso
- Kefir
- Bananas
- Cheese
- Garlic
- Tempeh
- Onions



PROBIOTICS

- Jarro-Dophilus Original by Jarrow Formulas (\$12*, 100 capsules, jarrow.com)
- Natren Healthy Trinity (\$40, 30 capsules, natren.com)
- Kyo-Dophilus (\$33, 180 capsules, kyolic.com)
- Garden of Life Primal Defense (\$49, 90 capsules, gardenoflife.com)

* All prices are approximate

not be able to fully break down, absorb and utilize the nutrients from your food. In the worst-case scenario, that dietary detritus gets stuck in your gut, and then the dreaded intestinal distress begins.

Luckily, it's possible to tip the bacterial balance in your favor by promoting the population of friendly flora, which includes bacteria from the commercially common genera *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, among others (within each genus there are numerous species, and within each species, further different strains of bacteria). We need these mighty microbes not only to keep the intestines healthy, but to help complete the digestive process and produce certain vitamins, like vitamin B₁₂.



Studies are revealing that probiotics may also improve immune functions and prevent allergies and asthma.

One way to get the upper hand in the bacteria battle is to supplement with probiotics, which are live microorganisms that promote the repopulation of beneficial bacteria in order to bring the bowels back into balance. (I know...lovely image, isn't it?)

Probiotics are generally safe and well tolerated. According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, probiotics have been shown to help treat diarrhea, urinary tract infections, yeast infections, irritable bowel syndrome and eczema (in children), and even reduce the reappearance of bladder cancer. Plus, studies are revealing that these healthy microorganisms may also improve immune function and prevent allergies and asthma.

For the best results, take them whenever you've completed a course of antibiotics, are experiencing chronic stress or digestive symptoms, or have deviated from your clean-eating routine. Purchase your probiotics from a reputable company (see "CE-Approved Probiotics," at left), and look for those that contain a colony count of a billion or more. Because probiotics are fragile organisms, you may want to store them in the fridge. As always, check with your doctor before taking any supplements. For more information, visit usprobiotics.org.



TAKE TWO ACIDOPHILUS AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING.

David Katz, MD, founder and director of Yale University School of Medicine's Prevention Research Center and author of Dr. David Katz's Flavor-Full Diet (Rodale, 2007), gives us the low-down on balancing the bugs in your belly.

Should everyone supplement with probiotics?

I'm not sure everyone needs to do so. But for those who have taken antibiotics, have any form of indigestion, or have immune system disorders, probiotics may be enormously beneficial.

What should we look for in a probiotic supplement?

A clearly stated colony count [of generally a billion or more], confirmation that the bacteria are alive and an expiration date. I take and recommend HMF Forte by Seroyal, but you need a physician to order it for you.

What else should we know about probiotics?

Getting probiotics in food may get the job done, but supplements are the most reliable way to get a concentrated dose. I was intolerant of nuts, but since taking probiotics daily, I can eat nuts comfortably again. Go figure!

You can take the supplements for a standard course of one to two months, then stop to see what happens to your symptoms. If symptoms recur, you can and should resume taking them. Some people wind up staying on the supplements long-term or permanently, which is safe.

Learn more at Dr. Katz's website, davidkatzmd.com.