

Good Bacteria, Great Benefits: Probiotics Pack a Powerful Punch at Any Age

Scientists have only recently begun to discover the full potential of probiotics. But as research continues, much is being learned about these beneficial bacteria and how they may improve the health of people everywhere.

Available in foods such as yogurt and kefir (a fermented milk drink) as well as in dietary supplements, probiotics are generally defined as live microorganisms (bacteria or yeast) that have been shown to help maintain a healthy balance of bacteria in the digestive tract. This is especially important because nearly three-quarters of your immune system is located in your digestive tract, so when that balance is upset, your health may suffer as a result. Ideally, there should be a balance of approximately 80% good bacteria and 20% percent harmful bacteria in your intestines. Unfortunately, factors such as poor diet, stress, illness, and exposure to toxic substances can affect that healthy environment.

Antibiotic use can also significantly alter the bacterial balance in your gut. Although their main purpose is to kill harmful bacteria, antibiotics often kill the existing beneficial bacteria as well. This can lead to diarrhea and other intestinal issues. Likewise, using anti-bacterial soaps has the same effect—killing many good bacteria at the same time it kills the bad bacteria.

Because of their vital role in maintaining a healthy bacterial balance in the digestive tract, studies have shown that probiotics help enhance the body's immune function. In addition to helping promote intestinal health, probiotics also assist with the digestion of dairy products—no doubt welcome news for those suffering from lactose intolerance. Other potential benefits of probiotics include maintaining healthy cholesterol and blood pressure levels, reducing inflammation and improving mineral absorption, and current research is also looking into how probiotics may help prevent irritable bowel syndrome, and inflammatory bowel disease. For women, supplemental Lactobacilli may help support vaginal and urinary tract health, thus preventing the discomfort of a yeast or urinary tract infection. Lactobacilli are the most prevalent beneficial bacteria in a healthy urogenital tract.

Infants and children may also benefit from using probiotics. Although newborns receive their first beneficial gut bacteria during the birthing process, supplying additional good bacteria (such as the essential strain *Bifidobacterium infantis*) throughout the early years may help support overall digestive and immune health. Probiotics may also reduce the risk of developing allergies at a young age, since they help support the intestinal lining and prohibit allergens from entering the digestive tract.

Adults over 50 years of age should also consider supplementing their diet with probiotics to obtain the immunity-enhancing benefits of these helpful bacteria, as preliminary research has shown that the amount of good bacteria in our intestines declines considerably with age.

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