

What Are Probiotics?

What are probiotics?

Probiotics are organisms (bacteria and yeasts) that are taken to improve health.

Why should I use them?

Our bodies are home to trillions of organisms. The right variety of these organisms can keep us healthy. Different types of organisms have different jobs. Some keep us healthy by fighting other disease-causing organisms. Others interact with immune cells to reduce inflammation or prevent allergic reactions.

Good, health-protecting organisms are fed by certain foods. When we eat, organisms in our gastrointestinal (GI) tract eat too. Sometimes, the numbers of good organisms can get low (for example, if you have diarrhea or if you take antibiotics). When this happens, taking probiotics may help increase the number of good organisms in your GI tract.

Which GI conditions can be improved with probiotics?

Probiotics can help if you have diarrhea after using antibiotics, *Clostridium difficile*-associated diarrhea, ulcerative colitis, or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). They can also help with colic in infants. See the table for a list of products to use for specific GI conditions.

Which GI conditions are not improved with probiotics?

Probiotics are probably not helpful if you have pancreatitis or Crohn disease.

Which species of probiotics are helpful?

Some of the probiotic species that have shown benefit include *Bifidobacterium*, *Lactobacillus*, *Leuconostoc*, *Saccharomyces boulardii*, and *Streptococcus*.

What are the risks of taking probiotics?

Probiotics are considered safe for most people (infants, children, adults, and older persons). However, they may cause problems in people with cancer or people who do not have a normal immune system. Rarely, probiotics have caused a serious blood infection in people with cancer.

What should I know when buying probiotics?

It is important to read the label. Think of three “Ds”: diversity, dose, and delivery.

- Diversity means that there are a lot of different species included, not just one.
- Dose is measured in colony-forming units (CFUs). You should aim for at least 10 billion CFUs per species.



Table. Gastrointestinal Conditions and Recommended Probiotics

GI condition	Studied products	Third-party tested products	Comments
Colic	—	Jarrow Formulas Baby's Jarro-Dophilus plus FOS Nature's Way Primadophilus Reuteri	—
Diarrhea after taking antibiotics	Align Bio-K+ Culturelle DanActive Florastor HOWARU Restore MIYAIRI 588 VSL#3	Garden of Life Raw Probiotics Ultimate Care Now Foods Probiotic-10 Renew Life Ultimate Flora Sedona Labs iFlora Multi-Probiotics	Broad-spectrum (containing many different kinds) combination products likely to have the most benefit Consider a minimum of 10 billion colony-forming units per day of each organism
Diarrhea from <i>Clostridium difficile</i>	Align Culturelle DanActive Florastor MIYAIRI 588 VSL#3	Garden of Life Raw Probiotics Ultimate Care Now Foods Probiotic-10 Renew Life Ultimate Flora Sedona Labs iFlora Multi-Probiotics	—
<i>Helicobacter pylori</i> infection	Bacid Culturelle Lactinex	Garden of Life Raw Probiotics Ultimate Care Now Foods Probiotic-10 Renew Life Ultimate Flora Sedona Labs iFlora Multi-Probiotics	Used with antibiotics
Hepatic encephalopathy	Align Mutaflor VSL#3	Garden of Life Raw Probiotics Ultimate Care Now Foods Probiotic-10 Renew Life Ultimate Flora Sedona Labs iFlora Multi-Probiotics	—
Irritable bowel syndrome	Activia Align Bacid Culturelle USANA VSL#3 YoPlus	Garden of Life Raw Probiotics Ultimate Care Now Foods Probiotic-10 Renew Life Ultimate Flora Sedona Labs iFlora Multi-Probiotics	—
Necrotizing enterocolitis	Bacid Culturelle Florajen Florastor	Florastor Kids Nature's Answer Probiotics for Kids	Products containing a variety of bifidobacteria species are most beneficial
Ulcerative colitis	Activia Align Bacid Culturelle Mutaflor VSL#3	Garden of Life Raw Probiotics Ultimate Care Now Foods Probiotic-10 Renew Life Ultimate Flora Sedona Labs iFlora Multi-Probiotics	VSL#3 and similar high-dose multispecies products with several bifidobacteria species are preferred

What Are Probiotics? *(continued)*

- Delivery is the way that you take the probiotic. Enteric-coated capsules make it more likely that more probiotic cells will reach your intestine. Probiotics can also be taken as powders, gel caps, gummies, liquids, and foods such as yogurt. Delivery affects the dose that makes it to your intestine. Choose a delivery method that is easy and comfortable so you will be more likely to take probiotics regularly.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Information Resource
<https://familydoctor.org/probiotics/>

Labdoor (probiotic product rankings)
<https://labdoor.com/rankings/probiotics>

National Institutes of Health: Dietary Supplement Label Database
<https://dslid.nlm.nih.gov/dslid/index.jsp>

National Institutes of Health: National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health
<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/probiotics>

August 2017

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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