

# PROBIOTICS

## One Bug You Want on Your Side

By Terri Yablonsky Stat

**Our guts are teeming with billions of bacteria essential to our gastrointestinal health and our ability to ward off chronic disease. When these bacteria work in our favor, we don't give them a second thought. But when our natural balance is off, many of us question the role that these bacteria play and how we can restore them.**



Probiotics—also known as friendly bacteria—help keep our gastrointestinal (GI) tract running smoothly. They help us digest food, absorb nutrients and keep harmful organisms from taking over, says Dr. Melinda Ring, medical director of Northwestern Integrative Medicine in Chicago. “It is important to have enough healthy bacteria; they crowd out other potentially harmful organisms and help keep them from proliferating.”

These healthy bacteria also help stimulate the immune system to prevent colds and flu as well as help treat inflammation in conditions like inflammatory bowel disease and eczema. Even those with lactose intolerance find that they can tolerate more lactose in their diet if they have enough good bacteria in their gut.

### DIET OR SUPPLEMENT?

“Our GI tract has trillions of microflora that are an arsenal of immune defense,” says Victoria Shanta Retelny, RD, LD, a Chicago-based food and nutrition expert

and author of *The Essential Guide to Healthy Healing Foods* (Alpha Books/Penguin). “Use food as a first line of defense on a daily basis because you never know when foreign invaders, like a virus or bacteria, will enter your system.”

Look for live, active cultures in fermented dairy products such as yogurt, kefir, miso, tempeh, kim chi (Japanese fermented cabbage), sauerkraut and fermented cheese products. The bacteria you'll most commonly find in foods include lactobacillus or bifidobacterium species, a type of yeast called *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (boulardii) and a yogurt starter culture called *S. thermophilis*.

The types and amounts of live active cultures vary among products. Check food labels to determine which strains of bacteria are in a product. Find out how much is alive when you're eating the product, because live active cultures can dissipate on the store shelf. Contact the manufacturer or review its website to find this information, says Retelny.

But if you have symptoms associated with irritable bowel syndrome, such as loose stools; have recently had any type of GI infection; or have recently taken a course of antibiotics, it's a good idea to take a probiotic supplement until symptoms improve, Retelny says. Supplements typically contain strains like enterococcus, bacillus and escherichia.

Different strains of bacteria help with different problems. Popular over-the-counter products, like Florastor and Culturelle, can be used for antibiotic-associated diarrhea, inflammatory bowel conditions and irregularity. Activia (think Jamie Lee Curtis) contains *Bifidus regularis*, which can help speed emptying of the gut when irregularity is the problem.

You can also consume foods that help create more friendly gut bacteria. These prebiotics—sugars that feed healthy bacteria in the gut—are found in foods like onions, garlic, shallots, honey, wheat bran, bananas, artichokes and leeks, says Retelny.