Probiotic power
Good bacteria keep getting better

Jenny Lass

“Probiotics may also improve the respiratory health of people with cystic fibrosis and of children with allergies and infections.”
You may have heard of probiotics, or good bacteria, but what you may not realize is just how good they are. Research on probiotics is gaining momentum as these microscopic wonders show increasing promise in preventing and controlling a surprising number of conditions in people of all ages.

Your digestive tract is filled with hundreds of bacteria—some good and some bad. In a normal digestive system, the good and bad bacteria strike a careful balance to keep you healthy. You can develop diarrhea when that balance is disturbed by illness or certain medications, resulting in reduced probiotic levels.

**GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE**

Probiotics are known to be a useful treatment for diarrheal conditions. Probiotics appear to be effective in preventing diarrhea caused by radiation treatment, and controlling diarrhea associated with liver cirrhosis and the toxins produced by the bacteria *Clostridium difficile*, often a side effect of antibiotic therapy. The symptoms of intestinal conditions such as ulcerative colitis and irritable bowel syndrome can also be reduced by probiotics. Pregnant and breastfeeding women may be able to boost their babies’ gut immunity by taking probiotics.

Recent research suggests probiotics may also improve the respiratory health of people with cystic fibrosis and of children with allergies and infections. Certain probiotic strains relieve vaginal and urinary tract infections, and some seem to reduce the recurrence of bladder cancer. Pregnant women taking probiotics may also prevent their children from developing eczema.

**BE PROACTIVE**

You don’t have to wait for symptoms to appear before going the probiotic route—you can take them to reduce your risk of developing a number of conditions. Of course, probiotics are only effective if they reach the intestine without first being destroyed by stomach acid, so it is key to choose a probiotic supplement with an enteric coating designed to preserve bacteria on its route through your digestive system.

Be sure to tell your doctor if you decide to take probiotics or if you begin to feel ill while taking them. With almost no potential side effects, probiotics, along with exercise and a sensible diet, can be a safe way to help you stay healthy.

**Choosing the right probiotic mix**

Choosing a supplement with a mixture of many probiotics is the easiest way to ensure you’re getting the most out of your proactive health regime.

- *Lactobacillus* (including *acidophilus, casei, and bulgaricus*)—controls diarrhea caused by antibiotics and in liver patients; improves respiratory health; may reduce risk of bladder cancer; may prevent childhood eczema.
- *Bifidobacteria* (including *infantis*)—controls diarrhea caused by irritable bowel syndrome and in cirrhosis and *C. difficile* patients.
- *Streptococcus thermophilus*—controls diarrhea caused by antibiotics.

**Jenny Las is a professional medical writer who specializes in nutrition. She co-authored Grain-Free Gourmet: Delicious Recipes for Healthy Living (Whitecap Books, 2005).**