

Bacteria with Benefits



Ronald Ciccone, MD
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Does the thought of tossing down millions of bacteria a day for your health seem hard to swallow? Products containing probiotics—often called “good” or “friendly” bacteria—are becoming increasingly popular.

You can find probiotics in dietary supplements and foods such as yogurt, milk, juice and soy drinks. But are these good bacteria helpful or a waste of money?

Aid in Digestion

“The normal digestive tract, with 100 trillion bacteria, contains about 400 types of probiotic bacteria. These help reduce the growth of harmful bacteria and promote a healthy, balanced digestive system,” said Ronald Ciccone, MD, Lourdes Health System director of Integrative Family Medicine.

Probiotics most often are used to help prevent and treat intestinal problems. Studies suggest that taking probiotics, along with drinking plenty of fluids, could shorten episodes of diarrhea by more than a day in both children and adults. Research also has shown that probiotics can reduce abdominal pain, bloating and gas from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) by as much as 34 percent.

From Flu to Cancer

Probiotics may have other benefits as well. A study of more than 300 children ages 3 to 5 found that taking probiotics lowered the incidence of fever up to 73 percent, cough 62 percent and runny nose 60 percent.

According to health experts, there’s also evidence that probiotics might:

- Prevent and treat urinary tract infections in women
- Lower the risk for bladder cancer recurrence
- Shorten episodes of intestinal infections caused by a bacterium called *Clostridium difficile*
- Prevent and treat eczema in children
- Decrease yeast overgrowth and reduce parasites

“Probiotics are generally considered safe. They’re already in your body, and some have been used for thousands of years, such as in fermented foods like kefir and soy products,” said Dr. Ciccone. “Routine use in healthy people can be helpful. However, as we all have unique combinations of probiotics in our bowels, some may not be appropriate for everyone. Talk with your doctor.”

If you decide to take probiotics, buy from well-established companies.

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