

Probiotics: Does Everyone Need Them?

There's a new food trend that's taking off and food industry experts say you'll be seeing more of it -- probiotic-enhanced foods. Food producers are starting to put it in items such as ice cream, coffee, tea, soups and even beer. Make-it-yourself Kombucha classes are popping at community colleges so consumers can make the probiotic-rich tea at home.

Then, there's an explosion of over-the-counter pill forms of live bacteria that help balance natural bacteria in the body. So it begs the question – should everyone be taking probiotics like a multi-vitamin or at least be seeking out foods rich in them?

Jamie Weyant, director of dietary services at OSF HealthCare Holy Family Medical Center in Monmouth, says for average, healthy adults there's nothing wrong with taking a probiotic. But she emphasizes there are hundreds of strains of probiotics so an over-the-counter probiotic might not help you if you have a specific problem such as chronic diarrhea or bloating.

“So not everything is clear cut where this strain or they have some recommendations where this strain might help with this problem but you really have to be a smart consumer and look up those studies and see what strain is best for the particular problem that I'm trying to solve,” she said.

Weyant advises seeking medical advice before taking any over-the-counter probiotics.

“I would consult your physician if you're having a particular problem and they would be able to recommend a certain type of probiotic that would have the certain strain of bacteria that would be recommended to help you with whatever problem you're having.”

Over-the-counter pill forms can be expensive. A survey of options of some top-selling probiotic supplements show they range in price from \$20 to just under \$30 for a two-month supply. And, researchers have not definitely confirmed the health benefits of taking probiotic supplements for a healthy person who eats a relatively balanced diet.

Weyant says eating a healthy diet is really the best way to maintain healthy flora in your digestive track.

“If you're consuming the live, active cultures and you're also consuming a healthy diet of the fruit and vegetables and the whole grains, that's the best case scenario to really improve the gut flora,” she said.

Weyant also points out people who eat highly-processed and fatty foods won't they feel any better by simply taking a probiotic supplement.

Whole grains and other foods such as bananas, greens, onions, garlic, soybeans and artichokes are known as prebiotics. They act as food for the probiotics already in the digestive system so it might be good finding ways to incorporate more of those foods in your meals.

For people who pick up a bug while traveling or for patients with irritable bowel syndrome, probiotics can be particularly helpful in reducing symptoms such as abdominal pain, bloating, and bowel movement irregularity.

Probiotics for babies?

Usually probiotics are not needed for healthy babies however, there is not likely any danger in giving them to infants according to Chief of Pediatrics for the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Peoria, Dr. Ian K. Kang who also provides specialty services to OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois.

“We give probiotics to children to prevent antibiotic associated diarrhea and to replenish healthy bacteria in children who have inflammatory conditions of the intestine,” he said.

“Probiotics are in some manufactured formulas, otherwise they are in powders or capsules, and can be poured into drinks or on foods, as long as they are not heated (which would kill the bacteria),” he added.

For adults and children, Weyant also has a warning that while probiotic are ok for most, they can pose a risk for some people.

“However, for some people who are immuno-compromised or having any kind of medical issues, it would be recommended they seek approval from their medical doctor before starting to take any of those supplements to see if there’s any kind of contraindications with any kind of medications that they’re taking as well,” she suggested.

Before taking any probiotic supplements, consult your doctor or your advance practice provider.

[Check here to find a provider.](#)

Ten foods rich in prebiotics

- Apples
- Asparagus
- Bananas
- Barley
- Edamame
- Garlic
- Mushrooms
- Oats
- Wheat bran
- Root veggies such as onions and leeks

Ten foods rich in probiotics

- Cottage cheese
- Dark chocolate
- Kefir
- Kimchi
- Kombucha
- Miso soup
- Pickles
- Sauerkraut
- Sourdough
- Yogurt

