

Consumer Reports on probiotics: ISAPP responds July 4, 2005

The July issue of Consumer Reports magazine (www.consumerreports.org, for subscribers only) discusses probiotic-containing products and reports on results from tests on microbiological content of US yogurts and dietary supplement products ("Probiotics. Are enough in your diet?", July 2005, p. 34-35). This article brings needed attention to the field of probiotics and makes several important points about dose delivered in a serving, differences among different strains of probiotics and the inadequacy of many labels on probiotic products that fail to inform consumers of the types and amounts of probiotic in the product, but oversimplifies conclusions. The magazine did not disclose microbiological methods use to reach conclusions and has not responded to inquiries by ISAPP to clarify methods. Two ISAPP board members sent the following letter to the editor to respond to this article, which has not been published.

To the Editors of Consumer Reports:

Consuming live bacteria can actually be a good thing? Congratulations on your article on probiotics, which highlights the potential value of consuming the right types of live bacteria. We were pleased to see you point out the importance of dose delivered in a serving, differences among different strains of probiotics and the inadequacy of many labels on probiotic products that fail to inform consumers of the types and amounts of probiotic in the product.

But we are concerned about your conclusions. Many yogurts and probiotic supplements contain more than one type of probiotic. Reporting the total number of bacteria in these products may be misleading. In the case of yogurts, the yogurt starter cultures (*Lactobacillus delbrueckii* subsp. *bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*) are present along with any added probiotic bacteria (such as *Lactobacillus acidophilus* or *Bifidobacterium*). While it is true that yogurts contain high levels of total bacteria, we suspect that if your methods were more discriminating, you would have found that these high counts were comprised mostly (99%) of the yogurt starter bacteria and not the additional probiotic bacteria. Likewise, in supplements, not all the bacteria listed on the label are necessarily at the same level. This is important to note for two reasons. First, consumers might assume that ALL bacteria listed on product labels are at the high levels you report. Second, the most important characteristic of a probiotic product is that it contains levels of the bacteria that have been documented to show health effects. Yogurt starter bacteria are responsible for some health benefits, especially aiding lactose digestion, but their range of effect is limited by the fact that they don't survive well through the intestinal tract.

Ideally, probiotic products should contain, through the end of shelf life, levels of live bacteria that have documented health benefits. Currently, this is not the case. It remains difficult for consumers to know which probiotic products meet these criteria.

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