

The P's and Q's of Probiotics: A Consumer Guide for Making Smart Choices

Developed by the International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics (www.ISAPP.net)

The concept of probiotics* has been around for over 100 years, but scientists are just starting to understand their role in maintaining health, regulating the immune system and managing disease. There are hundreds of probiotic products available and an overwhelming amount of information for consumers to sort through. The International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics (ISAPP) has developed the following key criteria to help consumers find a credible probiotic product.

PROBIOTIC STRAIN: Not all probiotics are created equal

- *Different strains of even the same species can be different* – Probiotics within the same genus (or group), such as *Bifidobacterium*, do not necessarily provide the same benefits. A probiotic is defined by its genus (e.g. *Lactobacillus*), species (e.g. *rhamnosus*) and strain designation (often a combination of letters or numbers). The names sound complicated, but they are important to connecting the specific probiotic strain to the strain's published scientific literature.
- *Trademarked* – Often, product manufacturers will create a trademarked (™) or registered trademark (®) name for the strain found in their product for marketing purposes. It is just an "alias" for the probiotic strain and does not necessarily reflect product quality.

PROOF: Probiotics must be tested in humans and shown to have health benefits

- *"Clinically proven": Do your homework* – Make certain that product claims of health benefits are based on sound research done on the particular probiotic. The product should contain the specific strain(s) of bacteria at the same levels as used in published research. The studies should be performed in humans and published in peer-reviewed, reputable journals. Check product Web sites to see study results. Your pharmacist or healthcare provider should be able to help you sort through the scientific language.
- *Claims: What do they mean?* – Most probiotics are sold as dietary supplements or ingredients in foods, and cannot legally declare that it can cure, treat or prevent disease. Claims which relate the product to *health* are allowable. Any claim made on a product, no matter how general, is supposed to be truthful and substantiated – but not all manufacturers have this clinical substantiation.
- *Get your doctor's OK* – Consult a physician before administering probiotics to neonates or newborns or to people with compromised immune systems or other major underlying illnesses. Read "Warning" and "Other Information" on the product package and be aware of any expected symptoms or side effects. Probiotic foods should be safe for the generally healthy population to consume.
- *More information* – The product you choose should offer resources to find more information, including a Web site or consumer hotline.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY: Choose a quality product at the right quantity

- *What are CFU?* – CFU stands for colony forming units, which is the measure of viable microbes in a probiotic. CFU amount should be the same as that shown to be effective in clinical studies. More CFUs does not necessarily mean better quality.
- *What is the minimum CFU I should look for?* – The important thing to know is that different probiotics have been shown to be effective at different levels. It is not possible to provide one count for all "probiotics" – scientific literature has documented health benefits for products ranging from 50 million to more than 1 trillion CFU/day.

PACKAGE: Pick quality packaging and a trusted manufacturer

- *What can the label tell you?* According to the World Health Organization (WHO), probiotics packages should include the following information:
 - **Strain** – *What probiotic is inside?*
 - **CFU** (Colony Forming Units) – *How many live microorganisms are in each serving? When does it expire?*
 - **Suggested serving size** – *How much do I take?*
 - **Health benefits** – *What can this product do for me?*
 - **Proper storage conditions** – *Where do I keep it to ensure maximum survival of the probiotic?*
 - **Corporate contact information** – *Who makes this product? Where to do I go for more information?*
- *Just because it says "probiotic," doesn't mean it is a probiotic* – Some products labeled "probiotic" do not have clinically validated strains or levels in the product. Although the scientific definition of probiotic stipulates that products be clinically evaluated, not all manufacturers abide by that.
- *Foods or supplements?* – Probiotics can be found in various foods, yogurts, and supplements. Probiotic content is generally more important than the way in which you consume them.
- *Live bacteria – through the end of shelf life* – Packaging should ensure an effective level of live bacteria through the "best by" or expiration date. Products should have an expiration date printed clearly on the package. Climate changes, exposure to oxygen and moisture can be important to keeping probiotics alive.
- *Obtain your probiotic from a trusted source* – A responsible manufacturer will make sure its probiotic product has the same strain(s) and is as potent through the end of shelf life as what was used in clinical studies.

*Probiotics are defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as "live microorganisms, which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host." http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/fs_management/en/probiotics.pdf .