

Probiotics show potential in certain health conditions

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(Medical Xpress) -- Products containing probiotics are popping up in many foods and dietary supplements found at your local grocery store. Although most people assume that probiotics are in fermented items such as yogurt and sauerkraut, manufacturers also are finding ways to produce other products such as dark chocolate, cereal, juice and pickles to contain these “bugs.”

Products with probiotics contain living organisms that are similar to the beneficial bacteria found in the gastrointestinal tract. Certain strands of probiotics may be beneficial in correcting damage caused by bad bacteria. Other strands may also counter the gastrointestinal effects of antibiotics. These organisms have shown promise in easing digestion, boosting the immune system and even fighting obesity. Current research also is looking at the role of probiotics in managing cancer, diabetes and allergies.

The bacteria in commercially available probiotics typically come from the species *Lactobacillus* or *Bifidobacterium* or *Streptococcus thermophilus*. A variety of other species exist and within each species there are different strains.

“Buyers should beware. Some products advertise that they contain probiotics when they do not offer the same bacteria as those that have been found to have health benefits,” said Gina Bucciferro, RD, Loyola University Health System. “The key to taking probiotics or ingesting products that include these organisms is to make sure you take the strain

and the amount that has the reported benefit you are looking for in a product."

Each strain of probiotics acts differently, which is why plenty of research is under way to evaluate its potential to ease various [health conditions](#). While the scientific understanding of probiotics is at an early stage, Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium have shown help with general digestion problems, lactose intolerance and inflammatory bowel disorders. A combination of these two strains has shown some potential for reducing symptoms of fever, cough and runny nose. Certain strains also have demonstrated benefits when taken by breastfeeding mothers or when put into infant formulas to reduce colic and eczema. There is insufficient evidence to rate the effectiveness of these species in enhancing the body's immune system.

"While much more scientific knowledge is needed about the safety and appropriate use of probiotics, the good news is foods containing these bacteria are regulated by the United States Food and Drug Administration," Bucciferro said. "The FDA does not require approval of claims made on packaging, but the manufacturer must be prepared to provide scientific evidence for use of any health statement if asked by the FDA. Despite the FDA's involvement, you should still consult your doctor before taking any [dietary supplements](#) and probiotics should not be used in place of medication."

Additional information is needed on the safety of probiotics for young children, elderly people and those with compromised immune systems. These organisms may cause infections in those people with underlying health conditions. Gas and bloating also may occur in healthy people who take [probiotics](#).

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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