

## Patient education: Probiotics (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What are probiotics?** — Probiotics are what many people call "friendly bacteria" or "good bacteria." They are bacteria that live in the body and help it work well. Often, probiotics help defend the body from infections caused by unfriendly bacteria or other germs.

Probiotics get into your body on their own, so you can get benefits without doing or taking anything extra. But some people take pills that contain probiotics because they think the pills will help keep them healthy. Some people even take "pre-biotics," which are pills that contain a form of food that probiotics like. The problem is, even though there is good proof that probiotics help the body, there is still no good proof that taking probiotic pills does any good.

**Do probiotic pills help improve health?** — A few studies have hinted that probiotic pills might improve health, but others show no benefit.

Right now, researchers are studying whether probiotics:

- Can help fight or prevent infections in the stomach or intestines, including a serious infection called Clostridium difficile (also known as "C diff")
- Can help with diarrhea, constipation, and some of the conditions that cause these symptoms, such as irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, and Crohn's disease
- Prevent or treat allergies, including a skin condition called eczema, which makes the skin itchy and flaky
- Help prevent or fight infections in the vagina

**Should I take probiotic pills?** — No. You should not take probiotics, unless your doctor or nurse tells you to. There is no proven benefit of taking probiotic pills.

**Should I eat yogurt with "active cultures"?** — Yogurt products that have "active cultures" have probiotics in them. If you like yogurt and can digest it normally, there is probably no harm in eating it. It's possible that eating yogurt will help your digestion and help keep you healthy. If nothing else, low-fat yogurt can be a part of a healthy diet.

Some women put plain yogurt directly into their vagina to help prevent or treat infections in the vagina. Experts do not recommend doing this, because studies have not proven that it actually helps.

**What are the downsides to taking probiotics?** — Probiotics are not regulated by the US Food and Drug Administration (the FDA) the way standard medicines are. That means that the companies that package probiotics don't have to prove that the ingredients listed on the label are actually in the bottle. In the end, you could buy a bottle that does not have what you think it has, so you could lose money. (Some probiotic pills are expensive.)

Even if you do find pills that contain what you think they do, there's a small chance the pills could do you harm. In particular, people with weak immune systems (for example, people on chemotherapy for cancer) should be extra careful. That's because probiotics could cause an infection.

The content on the UpToDate website is not intended nor recommended as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your own physician or other qualified health care professional regarding any medical questions or conditions. The use of UpToDate content is governed by the [UpToDate Terms of Use](#). ©2018 UpToDate, Inc. All rights reserved.

Topic 16894 Version 7.0