



Choosing the Best Probiotic

Confused by all the choices? This guide will help you know what's good quality and what's worthless.

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Definition of “Probiotic”: Live microorganisms which, when administered in adequate amounts, confer a health benefit on the host.

The human gastrointestinal tract has the most densely populated microbial system known. There are at least 400 species that have been identified with another 400 species that are present but have yet to be completely characterized and described. With that many different organisms, a certain balance between all of them is necessary to maintain proper homeostasis. Not only is balance between the microbes important for GI function, it is also pivotal for the proper regulation of the immune system, nervous system, and even the endocrine system. Furthermore, the gut microbiome helps to supply nutrients and vitamins, and facilitates mineral absorption. The disruption of the normal microbial balance is increasingly linked to disease and dysfunction—not only in the gut but all other body systems as well. Along with a plant-based diet and fermented foods, probiotic supplementation can be helpful in maintaining a healthy GI microbiome. Moreover, the number of scientific studies that demonstrate the efficacy of probiotics in the treatment of certain diseases is growing rapidly.

For a number of reasons, both clinicians and patients face a daunting task when trying to select the best probiotic. Not only are there hundreds of brands, there are also thousands of different formulations. With all these choices, how do you know which is best? In an effort to equip my patients with knowledge they need to make a good selection, I have listed the top 10 criteria for a good probiotic for general use. Keep in mind that specific species and strains may be required in larger “doses” to treat particular conditions.

Without further ado, my top 10 criteria for a good probiotic product:



1. Multispecies

- The human intestine naturally contains many diverse species of bacteria.
- Having a number of different species supports colonization in the intestine.
- Multiple species work together synergistically to provide health benefits above that of the individual species.
- Look for both Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium species.

2. Multistrain

- The difference between a species and a strain is quite technical, so suffice it to say that you need to multi-strains as well as multiple species!
- There are increasing numbers of scientific studies that are showing particular health benefits that are strain-specific.

3. High cfu formulation

- CFU means “colony forming units” and, in most cases, are in the order of *billions*. Probiotics must have enough cfu’s to guarantee colonization of the intestine. This could be likened to planting seeds. Not every seed germinates, so you need to plant enough seed to get a good crop.

4. Major allergen-free

- You definitely want your probiotics to be produced in a laboratory that is free of common allergens such as milk/casein, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, gluten, and soy. You also want the capsule (if encapsulated) to be free of these as well.

5. Acid-stable delivery

- The delivery system for the probiotics needs to withstand the highly acidic stomach and then withstand bile salts and enzymes in the duodenum (first part of the small intestine).
- Make sure that your probiotic is stable through these portions of the GI tract.

6. Genetic identification/verification

- Simply put, probiotics must have the included species/strains verified by laboratory analysis. Look for something like “this product has undergone RNA ribotyping” to validate the specific genetic patterns of the bacteria included.



7. GMP manufacturing

- GMP stands for “Good Manufacturing Practices.” Be sure that the probiotic has been manufactured in strict compliance with Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs).

8. Independent laboratory analysis

- Good companies submit their products to an independent laboratory for analysis. This third party quality certification is verification that a product has EVERYTHING in it that it claims to have.

9. Sufficient “overages” to guarantee long-term potency

- Since probiotics are living organisms, good companies put just a little more in their products than the stated amount to assure that they will retain their stated potency.

10. Refrigeration

- Was the probiotic shipped under refrigeration? If not, how do you know that it wasn't exposed to conditions that greatly impair the quality? Make sure it was shipped properly and then store the probiotic in your refrigerator. When you travel, take the amount you need with you and leave the remainder in the fridge. Unless you're going to be gone for several weeks, the amount you take with you should be fine unrefrigerated.

Yes, these are stringent criteria, but what good is a probiotic that doesn't have the microbes you need, doesn't have *live* organisms, doesn't maintain potency, isn't manufactured using proper processes, doesn't make it out of your stomach alive, isn't laboratory verified, but does have a bunch of allergens (and may have even worse things in it!)? Obviously, you will pay more for an excellent probiotic, but that's better than paying for something that's not a probiotic at all.

Cheers to your quest for even better health!

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