- Digestion / Digestive system



ALL ABOUT P-BIOTICS

BY KAREN ANSEL

Supplements containing prebiotics, probiotics and postbiotics are very hot right now, but the truth is, these nutrients and microorganisms are available through a well-rounded diet. What's the difference between probiotics and prebiotics? What about postbiotics? Here's what each P does for your gut.

PROBIOTICS

These good-for-you live microorganisms, such as bacteria and yeast, live peacefully in your body, providing numerous health benefits and protecting you against other more harmful organisms. You can increase the ratio of good to bad bacteria through food (and also through supplements, if needed).

▸Health benefits:

Decades of research indicate certain probiotics may ease constipation, prevent traveller's diarrhoea and relieve IBS and ulcerative colitis symptoms. They may also help with atopic dermatitis, high cholesterol and gum disease. But though there are many different kinds of probiotics, they're not interchangeable: these microbes are strain-specific, meaning each type has unique health-promoting actions. So while *Bifidobacterium infantis*, *Lactobacillus casei*, or *Lactobacillus plantarum* may help alleviate IBS-related gas and bloating, you'll want *Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG (LGG)* or *Saccharomyces boulardii* if your issue is antibiotic-related diarrhoea.

▸Best food sources:

The best sources of probiotics are fermented dairy products such as yoghurt and kefir, which usually boast multiple strains of bacteria. Though you may have heard that other fermented products such as kimchi and sauerkraut also contain probiotics, that's not exactly true, according to the US National Institutes of Health. They do contain live bacteria, but their beneficial bugs lack sufficient strength and number to qualify as probiotics.

▸Should you take supplements?

"If you're looking for a specific benefit, such as improving glucose regulation, you want a supplement that contains the exact strain or strains that have been shown to be effective for that condition," says nutritionist Monica Reinagel.

"Food is always best and should be prioritised, but I recommend supporting your gut with probiotics during a course of antibiotics, as probiotics have been shown to decrease the antibiotic-associated diarrhoea and infection with *C. difficile*," says holistic gastroenterologist Dr Elena Ivanina, who also recommends certain probiotics for patients with specific deficiencies in their microbiomes.

It's always advisable to speak with your doctor before taking a supplement; the ideal dose can vary depending on the strain and product.

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PREBIOTICS

As helpful as probiotics are when you eat them, they pass through the digestive tract, so they work their magic only until you poo them out. If your goal is to improve your long-term gut health by growing more good microbes in your gut, consider prebiotics, the majority of which are essentially carbohydrates we can't digest, such as fibre. These healthy carbs are like fertiliser for friendly gut bacteria.

▸Health benefits:

Prebiotics don't confer specific benefits on their own; instead, they help gut bacteria work better. After you consume a prebiotic-containing food, its fibre travels to your colon, where the healthy microbes that live there (or any probiotics you've eaten) break them down for food. This provides fuel that helps your good gut microbes grow and multiply, enabling them to crowd out harmful bacteria. There's another bonus: when these helpful bacteria thrive, they produce substances that nourish your colon and boost your immune system.

▸Best food sources:

The best way to load up on prebiotics is by eating fibre-rich plant foods, especially bananas, asparagus, whole grains, onions, garlic and soybeans.

"For a really healthy, diverse microbiome, the best way to do that is through prebiotic intake, through diet. The more diverse your diet, the more diverse your microbiome," says Dr Peters.

"One advantage to getting prebiotics from foods is that you can get many different types of fibre, and that in turn promotes a more robust and varied population of beneficial microbes," explains Reinagel.

Dr Ivanina recommends eating up to 30 different plant foods weekly to optimise your daily fibre intake – you're aiming for roughly 25g of fibre from food for women and 38g for men. A gut-healthy daily menu might be: breakfast of oats and banana; lunch of a burrito bowl with brown rice, black beans and sautéed onions and capsicum; a snack of a large apple; and dinner of grilled salmon with roasted asparagus and quinoa.

▸Should you take supplements?

Many prebiotics foods are high-FODMAP, a diet that helps people with IBS to identify their symptom triggers. "All of those things that help to build bacterial diversity are also the types of foods that contribute to symptoms in people with IBS. So sometimes supplementation is a really great way of enhancing the bacterial load but without getting the symptoms," says Dr Peters.

There are other times when a supplement can help, such as in the case of constipation or abnormal cholesterol, Dr Ivanina says. Look for prebiotic fibre in supplements such as inulin, galactooligo saccharides (GOS), and fructooligosaccharides (FOS). Dr Ivanina recommends starting with half the suggested dose to see how your gut responds. Always speak to your doctor before starting any new supplements.

Postbiotics

If probiotics and prebiotics had a baby, it would be postbiotics, substances your body produces after it feeds on prebiotics and probiotics. These include B vitamins, enzymes, amino acids and short-chain fatty acids such as butyrate.

▸Health benefits:

While research is still in its infancy, postbiotics show promise for calming intestinal inflammation, easing constipation, managing allergies, boosting immune health and more.

▸Best food sources:

A probiotic- and prebiotic- rich diet, which can help you produce your own internal postbiotic supply, is the perfect place to start. And while kimchi and kombucha may not contain sufficient probiotics, they do provide postbiotics, as do yoghurt, kefir and other pickled vegetables.

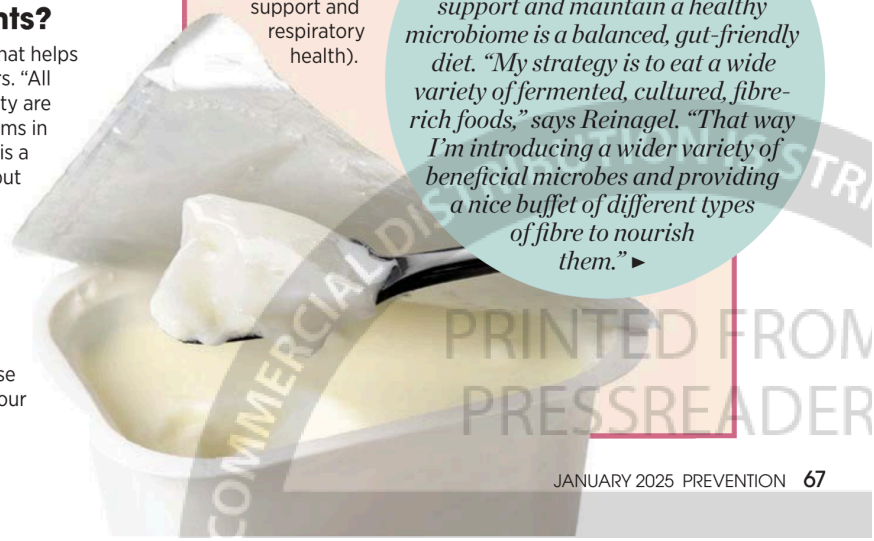
▸Should you take supplements?

Possibly. "Like probiotics, postbiotics are pretty specific in their applications," says Reinagel. "You want to match the postbiotic to the specific condition it's been shown to benefit." An additional upside: "Postbiotics are not live organisms, so they're more shelf-stable," says Reinagel.

At the same time, since postbiotics are relative newcomers to the market, there are fewer options available. Two with solid track records are sodium butyrate (shown to calm IBS-related pain, bloating, constipation and diarrhoea) and *Lactococcus lactis* (for immune support and respiratory health).

The bottom line

In most cases, all you need to support and maintain a healthy microbiome is a balanced, gut-friendly diet. "My strategy is to eat a wide variety of fermented, cultured, fibre-rich foods," says Reinagel. "That way I'm introducing a wider variety of beneficial microbes and providing a nice buffet of different types of fibre to nourish them." ▸



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