

Probiotics

Digestive Microorganisms

What are probiotics? The term was coined in the early 1990's to describe **living microorganisms within foods that provide health benefits beyond their nutritional value**. Probiotics survive passage into the bowel and have a beneficial effect on it. The microorganisms most frequently found in probiotics are human strains of lactobacilli, bifidobacteria and a few enterococci. However, there are many different beneficial species in the human digestive tract. **Humans are dependent on digestive tract microorganisms for achieving and maintaining optimal health**. What do digestive microorganisms do?

- The break down undigested food. This releases micronutrients (like vitamins K and B12). We then absorb these nutrients and they form an essential part of our nutritional resources.
- They defend the digestive tract from invasion by nonessential or harmful microorganisms by competing with them.
- They stimulate the immune system of the digestive tract. This maintains a healthy balance that aids in the defense against harmful pathogens. This healthy balance is also involved in maintaining oral tolerance (when the digestive tract knows that the food is foreign to our bodies but is harmless and can be safely allowed to enter our body).

Research in the past decade indicates that the risk for allergy in infants may be reduced when:

- pregnant mothers maintain a good bacterial balance in their digestive tract by taking probiotics, and
- infants are given probiotics to modulate their intestinal flora.

Some strains studied also have the potential to speed recovery from a food allergy in babies and children.

*This information was obtained from **Dealing with Food Allergies in Babies and Children** by Janice Vicerstaff Joneja, PhD, RD (2007). Dr. Joneja is one of only a handful of experts on food allergies in North America. She is both a researcher and a practitioner with over twenty five years experience dealing with the biochemical and immunological reactions involved in food allergy and intolerance.*

Adapted from Milkworks