

# Bugs that are good for the body

Probiotics are live bacteria and yeasts that are beneficial for the digestive system as well as overall health.

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GOOD gastrointestinal health is an important aspect of overall health and wellbeing. The gut plays a huge role in the body, ranging from digesting food and extracting nutrients to providing your body with energy.

In addition, it also handles disposal duties by collecting what is left over after the digestion process and eliminating these waste products as urine or stool.

A lesser known, but no less critical role, that your gut plays is its part in the functioning of the immune system.

Are you aware that your gut is home to trillions of microorganisms? These microorganisms, also known as gut microbiota, can make the difference between good or poor gut health. Therefore, they can also influence your overall health.

## Gut microbiota and probiotics

Gut microbiota are the microorganisms that live and thrive in your digestive ecosystem. They comprise both "good" and "bad" bacteria.

In a healthy digestive system, the gut's balance is maintained at about 85% good bacteria against 15% bad bacteria.

Probiotics are live or viable microorganisms, mostly bacteria, which can provide us with health benefits when consumed in adequate amounts on a regular basis. More commonly referred to as "good" bacteria, probiotics are able to help maintain a healthy gut microbiota balance, which is good for digestive and overall health.

Recognising this, probiotics have been combined into food products and are also available as a dietary supplement. Common probiotics that you will come across in the market are bacterial strains from the families Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium.

## How probiotics contribute to health

Probiotics have long been known to provide man with several positive health benefits. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that probiotics play a role in helping our guts handle a wide range of digestive health problems.

For instance, certain probiotics are effective in improving symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), diarrhoea (which includes traveller's diarrhoea, antibiotic associated diarrhoea, and acute infectious diarrhoea), constipation and certain types of inflammatory bowel disease.

Emerging evidence also reveals that probiotics positively influence immunity.

Furthermore, there is on-going research on the potential role of probiotics in influencing a person's mood and behaviour.

## Regulated by MOH

The Food Safety and Quality Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) monitors and regulates products that bear the label "probiotics" or "probiotic cultures".



You can get enough probiotics in your diet by consuming probiotic-rich foods. Main sources include cultured milk drinks, fermented milk products, yoghurt, cultured cream, or sour cream. — TNS



There are other aspects of lifestyle for ensuring good gut health, such as consuming a balanced and varied diet high in dietary fibres. — AFP

This comes under the purview of the 1985 Food Regulation which recently introduced an amendment in 2018 that spells out specific requirements for probiotic products.

The amendment has provided a list of 32 Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium strains recognised as probiotic bacterial cultures. The law also requires the manufacturer to include the name of that particular strain and viable number of bacteria contained in their product.

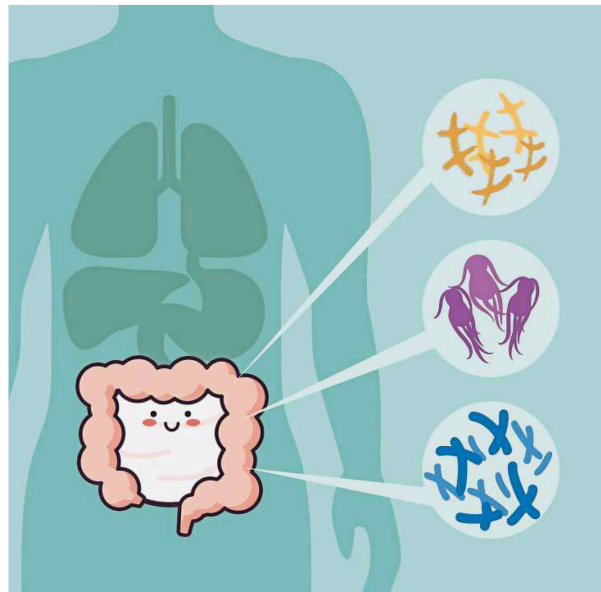
The law also allows manufacturers to add probiotic cultures to food and label them as "containing

probiotics" or "probiotic cultures" on their packaging. Having such a prominent label will help you to be a savvy consumer, by being able to correctly identify genuine probiotic products from the label.

## Probiotics foods

You can get enough probiotics in your diet by consuming probiotic-rich foods. Main sources include fermented milk products that contain probiotic cultures, e.g. cultured milk drinks, fermented milk products, yoghurt, cultured cream, or sour cream.

When grocery shopping for pro-



Gut microbiota are the microorganisms that live and thrive in the gastrointestinal tract. — 123rf.com

biotic foods, there are several points to bear in mind, namely checking the label for the words "probiotic cultures".

It should also be stated clearly on the label that the cultures are alive or viable.

The quantity of probiotic cultures present in the food product must be clearly stated – by law, it must contain a minimum of 10<sup>8</sup> CFU/ml or CFU/g; CFU is short for "colony forming units", which is used to measure the number of microorganisms.

There should also be directions on the packaging on how to store the product before and after (if applicable) the package is opened.

The genus, species and strain of probiotic used in the product must be stated on the product as only certain strains have been approved by MOH.

Traditionally prepared fermented foods may also be potential sources of beneficial bacteria. Some examples of these are non-fried tempeh, homemade yoghurt, kimchi and tapai.

However, as these are usually homemade, the types and number of bacteria are usually not well characterised and standardised. Therefore, while they may contain beneficial bacteria, they would, in all likelihood, not meet the criteria stipulated by MOH to be termed as probiotics.

You can also find probiotic supplements sold in pharmacies, either in powdered or pill form.

When it comes to storage, dosage and frequency of consumption, be sure to follow the instructions on the product labels in order to maximise its effectiveness. Should you have any doubts, check with the pharmacist or a healthcare professional before buying and consuming any probiotic supplements.

## Holistic approach to gut health

While probiotics is an important component of good gut health, we should not rely solely on it. There are other aspects of lifestyle for ensuring good gut health, such as consuming a balanced and varied diet high in dietary fibres.

You should also practise balance, moderation and variety in your daily diet, include foods rich in fibre, drink plenty of water, be physically active, and get enough sleep every day.

Avoid eating too much fried foods and minimise your intake of oil, salt and sugar.

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