

PROBIOTICS & YOUR HEALTH

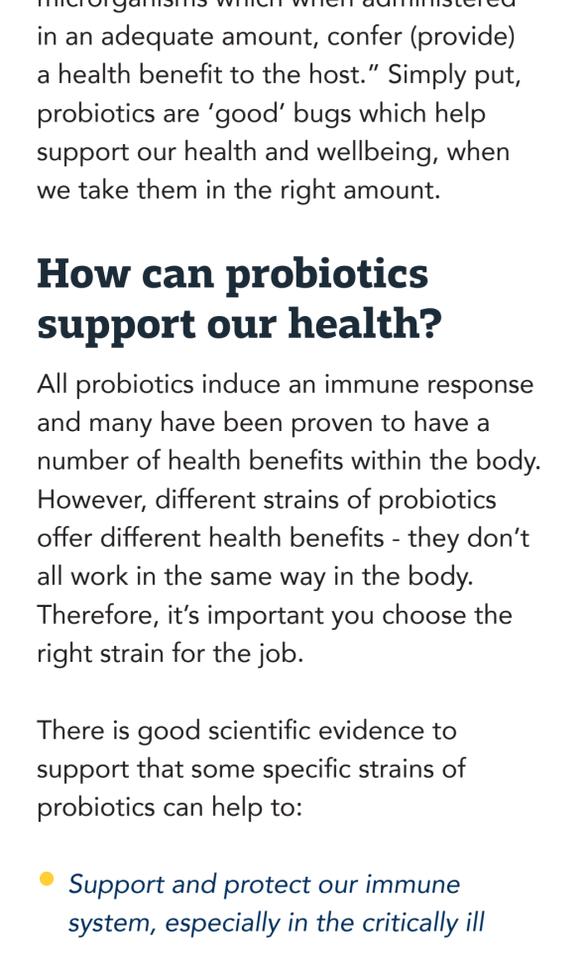
AUTHOR
Angela Berrill
– NZRD, PGDipDiet, BCAPSc, BCom
Director and dietitian ABC Nutrition Ltd

Fermented foods and drinks have gained ‘superfood’ status in recent years. But why are they meant to be so good for us and what exactly are probiotics?

A healthy digestive tract (commonly referred to as our gut) contains more than 400 different species of bacteria. These bacteria are what make up our ‘microbiome.’ This equates to approximately 100 trillion microorganisms, weighing together approximately 1.5kg - 2kg. That’s a lot of bacteria!! Most of these bacteria, live in our colon (large intestine) where the environment is less acidic. Just as our fingerprints are unique, so is our gut’s microbiota.

As we evolve and develop over time, so does our microbiome. A baby is born with a sterile gut but as we age, the bacteria in the gut starts to grow and evolve. This delicate balance of bacteria is affected by the food we eat, our age, medications, health conditions, allergies, alcohol and stress.

70% of our body’s immune system is localised in our gut and therefore the healthy balance of bacteria in our gut’s microbiome has a direct impact on our overall health and wellbeing. A healthy balance of bacteria helps to support the absorption of nutrients, elimination waste, our metabolism and our immunity.



What are probiotics?

Probiotics are defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “live microorganisms which when administered in an adequate amount, confer (provide) a health benefit to the host.” Simply put, probiotics are ‘good’ bugs which help support our health and wellbeing, when we take them in the right amount.

How can probiotics support our health?

All probiotics induce an immune response and many have been proven to have a number of health benefits within the body. However, different strains of probiotics offer different health benefits - they don’t all work in the same way in the body. Therefore, it’s important you choose the right strain for the job.

There is good scientific evidence to support that some specific strains of probiotics can help to:

- Support and protect our immune system, especially in the critically ill
- Destroy toxins or pathogens
- Increase nutrient absorption and make vitamins B12 and K
- Relieve constipation
- Reduce the incidence of traveller’s diarrhoea
- Prevent antibiotic-associated diarrhoea
- Reduce symptoms of Irritable Bowel (IBS)
- Reduce symptoms of Ulcerative Colitis

There is weaker, but emerging evidence to support that some probiotic strains may also be able to:

- Reduce the incidence of atopic dermatitis (eczema)
- Support our mood and mental health (via the gut - brain axis)

If you are after a specific health benefit, not only will you need to ensure you choose the right strain of probiotic but you will also need to ensure you take the recommended dose.

For general health and wellbeing, while there are no specific recommendations round how many probiotics we should include in our diet, given their many health benefits, most experts agree we should try to include fermented foods every day.

What foods contain probiotics?

Probiotics can be found in a range of fermented foods including yogurt, cheese, sauerkraut, pickles, kefir, kimchi, miso, sourdough, or kombucha. Due to the fermentation process, these foods are easily digested by the body and can provide our gut microbiome with live bacteria, sometimes including probiotics. However, not all fermented foods contain probiotics.

“While all probiotics are ‘live’ bacteria, not all ‘live’ bacteria have probiotic activity.”

If products have been pasteurised, or heat-treated, it is also likely that many of the beneficial bugs would have been killed off during the heating process. The good news is that most (but not all) store-bought foods which contain proven probiotics will clearly state so on-pack.

You will usually see the probiotic strain (e.g. Lactobacillus acidophilus) listed in the Nutrition Information Panel, along with the product’s corresponding amount of live bacteria, as CFUs (Colony Forming Units). The higher the number of CFU, usually the better.

In addition to getting probiotics from the food we eat, we can also purchase probiotic supplements. These often contain higher doses of probiotics and will usually target a specific health area e.g. gut health or immunity. Many of these supplements need to be kept in the fridge, however some shelf-stable varieties are available. As fermented foods contain a variety of healthful nutrients, in addition to probiotics, a food first approach is usually a good place to start.

Tips to help you get the most out of your daily probiotics

- Include some fermented foods into your diet every day
- Choose the right strain of probiotics for the job
- Dose matters - look for products which contain a higher (and ‘proven’) number of CFUs

About Angela

Well-respected Dietitian, Angela Berrill is a nutrition educator and an accomplished speaker, writer and presenter. Angela is passionate about health and nutrition, and believes in finding ways for people to enjoy food while also nurturing their bodies.

As an expert nutritionist, Angela is regularly called on to share her expertise and opinions by the media. Angela most recently featured as nutrition myth-buster and dietitian for **Eat Well For Less New Zealand** series.

In 2008, Angela founded ABC Nutrition - a team of Registered Dietitians, located throughout New Zealand, who believe in making nutrition easy and uncomplicated. Whatever your nutrition question, the ABC team has the answer!

To find out how ABC Nutrition’s experienced dietitians can help you, head over to our website: <https://www.abcnutrition.co.nz/nutrition-consultations> for more details.

Subscribe to **mediwell**