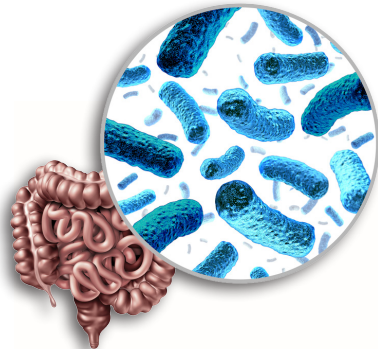


# Should Parents Give Probiotics to Children?

by Erica Berg, MD



**No established dose or brand**



Maybe yes. How's that for an answer? We have to wait for more research before giving a definite answer.

*Probiotics* are live bacteria which appear to be good for our digestive systems and possibly for overall health. Billions of good bacteria already live in our gut (intestines). Good bacteria are believed to block out unhealthy ones which could cause disease. *Probiotics* add extra good bacteria to the good bacteria we already have. *Probiotics* are found in foods and dietary supplements. Your child's granola bars, yogurt, cereal may contain them.

There is a long and careful process before medications become approved and before doctors can prescribe them. Our FDA (*Food and Drug Administration*) must review all studies and find the medication to be safe and effective. Safe dosing is studied and approved as well.

But *Probiotics* are considered food products so they are not regulated by the FDA. So when we talk about *Probiotics* we use phrases like "generally safe" and "probable helpful" for some children's illnesses. We cannot be sure what the best doses are.

Research suggests that *Probiotics* could be useful for intestinal problems such as constipation, acid reflux, diarrhea, and gas. Other claims of benefit for oral (dental) health, gut immunity, and eczema are less well researched.

*Probiotics* are being given to preterm babies to help prevent a dangerous problem in the gut called NEC. Neonatologists have studied this extensively.

If *Probiotics* are given in the beginning of a healthy baby or young child's "stomach flu", diarrhea may go away about one day sooner. There is not enough study for us to recommend this routinely unless there are special circumstances. There is some data to support the use of probiotics to *prevent* antibiotic-associated diarrhea but no evidence that it is beneficial for treatment.

Most probiotics contain *lactobacillus*, *bifidobacterium* or *saccharomyces*. Some combine all three. *Lactobacillus reuteri* and *Bifidobacterium infantis* are the two most studied in babies and children, showing benefit. Products list the concentration of bacteria in them, but the exact amount getting to the small and large intestine is unknown. So the ideal dose is unclear. The main barrier to the routine use of probiotics is a lack of consensus on the type and dosage as well as well designed safety studies.

*Probiotic* capsules, tablets, powders and liquid extracts can be found at health food, pharmacy or grocery stores. *Probiotics* have been added to many infant formulas and appear to be safe.

Fermented foods are a natural source of *Probiotics*: pickles kefir, sauerkraut, tempeh, kimchee, and miso. Yogurt with "live or active cultures", buttermilk, and soft cheeses (like Gouda) are great also.

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