



# Going pro

Probiotics show promise for boosting health and managing disease

by NANCY MONSON



**H**ave you had your probiotics today? You've probably seen these gut-friendly supplements on Costco's shelves, not to mention in supermarkets and drugstores.

"Probiotics are the most exciting revelation in health and wellness I've seen in a long time," says registered nutritionist and Costco member Ellie Krieger, author of *You Have It Made: Delicious, Healthy, Do-Ahead Meals* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016; not available at Costco). "We are learning that the health of the gut, the home of 70 percent of your body's immune system, affects the health of your whole system—and probiotics are key players in supporting gut health."

## **COSTCO CONNECTION**

A variety of probiotic-rich foods and supplements are available in most Costco warehouses and at Costco.com.

## **What are probiotics?**

Probiotics are good bacteria that keep bad bugs like salmonella and *E. coli*, which live side by side with the healthy bacteria in our bodies, in check. If the balance between the good and the bad bacteria goes askew—due to taking antibiotics, stress, smoking, hormonal shifts, aging, overconsuming processed foods or illness—we can get sick. It's now believed that increasing consumption of probiotics, in the form of foods or supplements, can help maintain the ideal balance.

Over the past two decades, researchers have conducted many small, short-term trials of a wide variety of probiotics and have found they can improve digestion and immunity. They are also proven effective in relieving diarrhea associated with the use of antibiotics, as well as in fighting infections, and relieving gas, bloating and constipation.



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### What's the best way to get probiotics?

Should you try to get your probiotics from foods or supplements? “My advice is always to turn to food first,” says nutrition consultant Bonnie Taub-Dix, a Costco member and author of *Read It Before You Eat It: Taking You from Label to Table* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017; not available at Costco). “Foods multitask in a way supplements can’t, and whole foods may contain probiotics as well as other nutrients that are important for your health.”

Probiotic-rich foods include fermented dairy products such as yogurt, kefir and aged cheeses, along with sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, tempeh, pickles and beverages such as kombucha. “The problem is we don’t know how much of these foods you need to consume,” says Krieger.

What’s more, some of these foods aren’t familiar to Americans or suited to their palates. For this reason, both nutritionists suggest consuming a combination of probiotic-rich foods and supplements.

That means discerning among the many available probiotics, a category of products that has exploded over the past few years. Experts advise sticking to major brands that have science backing the label claims, such as Align, Culturelle, FloraStor and Nature’s Bounty, to name a few. Krieger recommends starting with 15,000 billion colony-forming units (CFUs) and going up from there if you feel you could benefit from a higher dose.

### Are there any risks to taking supplements?

Researchers have found little harm in taking probiotic supplements, although two small recent studies published in the journal *Cell* caused some concern. One found that taking probiotics may delay the ability of the gut to rebound after a course of antibiotics, and another found that probiotic supplements simply may not work in some people.

“For me, these studies show that we need more research in general about probiotics,” says Krieger. “The fact that probiotics don’t populate the gut indicates that it’s important to take the supplements daily. And ... we know that there are multitudes of other studies that show probiotics are helpful.”

Most adults and children can safely consume probiotics, according to experts. Some people may experience gas and bloating at first, but these side effects tend to dissipate quickly as the body adjusts or if a person lowers the number of CFUs they consume. ■

Nancy Monson is a certified health coach and a freelance writer and artist.

## PREBIOTICS AND PROBIOTICS DEFINED

### Prebiotics

Moving beyond probiotics, you may also be hearing about “prebiotics.” No, it’s not a typo. Prebiotics are soluble dietary fibers that provide energy for probiotics. They’re found in fruits, vegetables, beans and grains. Some probiotics are now available with prebiotics in combination products.



### Probiotics

The World Health Organization defines probiotics as “live microorganisms, which when consumed in adequate amounts, confer health and benefit on the host.”—NM



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