You are not alone. Living on and in your body are trillions of bacteria, a good chunk of them in your gastrointestinal tract. Lay them end to end and they would circle the earth 2½ times.

While the vast majority of those bugs are harmless (the harmful ones are largely disarmed by your immune system), some are beneficial. They may crowd out disease-causing bacteria, for example, or help you digest fiber.

Not surprisingly, some companies have started adding helpful bacteria—called probiotics—to their yogurts, drinks, and supplements.

Are they worth taking?

“We believe that there might be value in adding certain living, non-disease-causing bacteria and other microbes to our diets,” says Mary Ellen Sanders, president of the International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics. (Prebiotics are ingredients that stimulate the growth of probiotic bacteria.) The California-based nonprofit group was started in 2002 with a grant from yogurt maker Dannon.

But probiotics won't help everyone, say experts. “If you’re healthy and are not planning to take antibiotics, go into the hospital, or maybe take a trip out of the country, there is no benefit from taking probiotics,” says microbiologist Lynne McFarland of the Veterans Administration Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, Washington. McFarland is co-author of The Power of Probiotics, which is due out next spring.

Here’s the lowdown on some of the most popular probiotic foods and supplements.
**Stonyfield Farm Yogurt**

**What’s in it:** *L. acidophilus, Bifidus, L. casei,* and *L. reuteri* 55730. Stonyfield Farm says that it sells the only U.S. yogurt with *L. reuteri.*

**Cost:** About $30 a month for one 6-oz. tub.

**Claims:** *L. reuteri* can fight “viruses and bacteria associated with diarrhea and gastrointestinal disease” and “harmful bacteria such as Salmonella, *E. coli,* Staphylococcus, Candida yeast, and other harmful microorganisms.”

**Evidence:** Only one published study has tested Stonyfield’s strain of *L. reuteri* in adults. Among 128 day workers at a Swedish company, those who took a daily supplement of *L. reuteri* for 80 days were just as likely to call in sick as those who got a placebo.1

But among night workers, none of the 26 who got the *L. reuteri* took sick leave, compared with nine of the 27 who got the placebo. The researchers speculated that the *L. reuteri* bacterium may have bolstered the workers’ immune systems, which could have been weakened by the stress of working nights. Clearly, one study on some 50 people isn’t enough to say.

In several small studies in infants and children, drinks containing, *L. reuteri* cut the rate of diarrhea by about one-third and shortened its duration by about a day.


---

**DanActive Drink**

**What’s in it:** *L. casei Immunitas,* Dannon’s name for *Lactobacillus casei* DN-114 001.

**Cost:** $40 a month for two 3.3-oz. bottles a day.

**Claims:** On Dannon’s Web site, grandparents drink DanActive to “help strengthen my body’s natural defenses,” Mom drinks it to help “keep my balance and my defenses at their best,” older teens drink it to stay healthy despite a “stressful and hectic lifestyle which may run me down,” and younger kids drink it because they’re exposed to junk that’s “not really clean.”

**Evidence:** DanActive didn’t prevent infection or disease in the only study that looked. Dannon researchers gave 180 Italian men and women (average age 67) seven ounces (two bottles) of DanActive every day for three weeks. It was an “open pilot” study, so the DanActive drinkers knew they were taking something that might help them. Nevertheless, they were just as likely to get colds and gastrointestinal illnesses as the 180 seniors who didn’t drink DanActive.1

But when the DanActive drinkers did get colds, they lasted an average of 1½ days less than the non-DanActive group’s colds. The researchers recommended doing a larger, double-blind study, which wouldn’t tell participants whether they were getting DanActive or a placebo. Guess Dannon didn’t agree, since it’s been three years and no other studies have been done.

The company makes no mention on its Web site that one out of four DanActive drinkers in the Italian study suffered so much bloating, gas, and nausea that the researchers had to cut their daily allotment of DanActive in half.


---

**Kashi Vive Cereal**

**What’s in it:** *Lactobacillus acidophilus* LA14.

**Cost:** About $27 a month for one 1¼-cup serving a day.

**Claims:** Probiotics “promote digestive balance and immunity,” says the box of “the first probiotic digestive wellness cereal.”

**Evidence:** No published research has tested the *L. acidophilus* strain in Vive for any health benefits. So why did Kashi choose it? “Because it survives digestion,” said a company spokesperson. And what, exactly, does it do after it has survived?

“We don’t have any information about that,” said the spokesperson.
**Culturelle**

**What’s in it:** *Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG* (ATCC 53103).

**Cost:** $20 a month.

**Claims:** “Helps promote regularity.” “Helps reduce bowel and stomach discomfort.”

**Evidence:** The two small studies that looked at whether *Lactobacillus GG* (LGG) can “promote regularity” (in 15 Finnish women and 43 Polish children) came up empty.\(^1,2\) But the bacterium does seem to help prevent diarrhea in children given antibiotics. In two studies of a total of 300 children, those who got the probiotic pills along with an antibiotic were 70 percent less likely to report loose stools than those who got a placebo.\(^3\)

But *Lactobacillus GG* flunked its big trial in adults at the Mayo Clinic in 2001. Researchers there gave 302 hospitalized patients who were being treated with different antibiotics either LGG or a placebo. LGG made no difference. After two weeks, 29 percent of those taking the probiotic reported having diarrhea, compared with 30 percent of those taking the placebo.\(^4\)

**Multibionta**

**What’s in it:** A multivitamin plus *Lactobacillus gasseri* PA 16/8, *Bifidobacterium bifidum* MF 20/5, and *Bifidobacterium longum* SP 07/3.

**Cost:** $7 a month. (Multibionta is available only at CVS/pharmacy.)

**Claims:** Helps “people who feel down or susceptible to a state of poor health.”

**Evidence:** In the only good study, researchers in Germany gave 225 healthy men and women the probiotics in Multibionta every day over two successive cold seasons.\(^1\) The probiotic takers came down with the same number of colds as 229 men and women who received a placebo.

But their colds were, on average, two days shorter than the placebo takers’ colds; their fevers lasted, on average, six hours (versus 24 hours for the placebo takers’); and they reported lighter bronchial symptoms.

Worth taking? Maybe, but it would be a surer bet if future studies confirmed the German results.

---

By Judy Pinkston


**Florastor**

**What’s in it:** *Saccharomyces boulardii*, a yeast that can reside temporarily in the GI tract.

**Cost:** $42 a month.

**Claims:** Can “help” with diarrhea caused by antibiotics, food poisoning, traveling to other countries, and *Clostridium difficile* infections that people pick up in hospitals.

**Evidence:** “There are well-done, big, blinded studies that show that *S. boulardii* is good for preventing diarrhea associated with taking antibiotics,” says Lynne McFarland of the Veterans Administration Puget Sound Health Care System. (McFarland is the former director of scientific affairs for Florastor’s manufacturer.)

When McFarland pooled the results of six good studies in a recent meta-analysis, she found that giving *S. boulardii* to antibiotics takers cut their risk of diarrhea by more than half.\(^1\)

“And there are two well-done trials showing that it can reduce, by 40 percent, recurrences of diarrhea from *Clostridium difficile* infections in hospitalized patients,” she adds.

Can Florastor prevent traveler’s diarrhea? “There are a couple of studies, but they’re old and have some problems,” says McFarland, “so it’s not clear how effective it might be for that.”

---