



TRUST YOUR *gut*

Story | ANGELA AMBROSE

taking probiotics has become an increasingly popular way to maintain a healthy digestive system. Probiotics are live microorganisms—known as “good” bacteria—that are available in food or dietary supplements.

“Our intestinal tracts are lined with bacteria that are very important in our digestion, and we need good bacteria to digest and have a normal immune system. We also need good bacteria to fight off the bad bacteria we get exposed to,” says Rosemary Pauley-Hunter, APRN, pediatric gastroenterology nurse practitioner at Boys Town National Research Hospital in Nebraska.

Probiotics can be found in some yogurt products, kefir and other fermented foods. They can also be purchased as dietary supplements in convenient capsule, tablet, liquid or powder form at local grocery stores and

drug stores.

A large number of probiotic supplements have flooded the market in recent years, giving consumers a mind-boggling number of choices. Because they are not labeled a drug, they do not need Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval, and the claims on the labels may not be substantiated.

“The FDA gives the probiotics the status of GRAS (generally regarded as safe) and because of this status, there is minimal regulation they have to go through,” says Dr. Stefano Guandalini, professor of pediatric gastroenterology at the University

of Chicago School of Medicine.

“They are incredibly safe,” Guandalini continues, but he says the lack of regulation makes it difficult for consumers to select an effective probiotic from the large number on the market.

Although hundreds of bacterial strains exist, only a few have been clinically studied and proven to be beneficial to the gastrointestinal system, according to Pauley-Hunter. They are marketed under the trade names Align, Culturelle, VSL#3, Florastor and Biogaia.

Each probiotic strain is different and has a specific effect on the gastrointestinal tract. For example, the bacteria most beneficial for antibiotic-induced diarrhea is different from the strain that is most effective for Irritable Bowel Syndrome or Ulcerative Colitis.

Although research is still underway, some studies indicate that probiotics may also boost the immune system.

“There’s a big push to give probiotics to the elderly, who lose beneficial bacteria as they age,” says Pauley-Hunter, who travels around the country educating medical professionals about the benefits of probiotics.

If you’re unsure about the type of probiotic or dosage to take, she recommends consulting your doctor or pharmacist. Although probiotics are considered safe for the general population, she advises individuals with severely depressed immune systems to talk with their healthcare professional before taking them. ✦

DID YOU KNOW?

Worldwide sales for probiotic foods and dietary supplements are expected to reach \$42 billion by 2016, according to NutraIngredients-USA.com. With the soaring demand in the U.S., per capita spending is forecasted to nearly double between 2011 and 2016.