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## The pros and cons of probiotics for kids

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### Probiotics may work differently for kids

It's a word you probably hear on TV and see as you walk down the health food aisle of the grocery store—probiotic. Probiotics are all the rage in health foods, healthy living blogs and new diets.

People use probiotics to regulate their digestive systems. Many diets encourage using probiotics to help “clean out” the body, which is why companies claim probiotics can help with weight loss, energy levels, immune system support and digestive health.

Some parents may give probiotic foods to their kids, hoping it will make them healthier, too. But probiotics don't always work the same for children.

“Probiotics are useful for keeping your digestive tract healthy,” said Geisinger pediatrician Dr. Maria Samonte. “But it's important to be informed about which probiotics you give to your child—they may not work the same way they do with adults.”

#### **Probiotics are good bacteria**

“Your body is home to billions of organisms like bacteria, fungi and yeasts,” said Dr. Samonte. “Most of these organisms are harmless and many actually help your body work properly. They form what experts call the human microbiome.”

Probiotics are some of the helpful bacteria that make up your microbiome. They occur naturally in certain foods and also come in supplement form.

Fermented and aged foods like yogurt, sauerkraut, kombucha, kimchi, kefir and cottage cheese all contain different types of probiotics. Your kids likely get most of their probiotic intake from yogurt.

Probiotics help replenish your body's "good bacteria." That helps with digestion, immune system function and may even help treat or prevent certain diseases.

Probiotics are especially helpful for diarrhea or constipation—both of which are common for kids, especially during potty training. Probiotics can help the symptoms of [irritable bowel syndrome](#) and inflammatory bowel disease as well.

In addition, probiotics can help children already taking antibiotics. Antibiotics can cause stomach pain, constipation or diarrhea, and probiotics can ease these side effects. Not all probiotics are effective while taking antibiotics, so talk to your child's pediatrician or pharmacist about which probiotic is best for your child.

### **Should children eat probiotic foods?**

"Generally speaking, probiotics are safe for kids, unless your child has a compromised immune system, cancer or is a premature infant," said Dr. Samonte. "In that case, probiotics can put children at risk for infections."

Some studies suggest that probiotics may be good for children. One study found that children who were given probiotics every day for three months were less likely to have respiratory problems and diarrhea than children who were given a placebo.

Some research also suggests that probiotics help kids avoid conditions like autoimmune diseases, [allergies and asthma](#), but more research is needed.

On the other hand, some researchers suggest that probiotics may not have much effect on children. Because their microbiome isn't fully developed, probiotics may simply be passed as normal waste.

For children, it's generally better to get probiotics through foods instead of supplements, unless otherwise recommended by a pediatrician. Talk to your child's pediatrician if you would like to use probiotics to help your child's digestion.

*[Dr. Maria Samonte, MD](#), is a pediatrician at Geisinger Mountain Top. To schedule an appointment for your child with Dr. Samonte or another Geisinger pediatrician, call 800-275-6401 or visit [Geisinger.org](#).*