Probiotics and Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Information for patients
Sheffield Dietetics
Is there bacteria in the gut?

The human gut contains millions of bacteria. These bacteria play an important role in keeping us healthy. An imbalance of bacteria in the gut can happen when more of the 'bad' bacteria are present than the 'good' bacteria.

This may occur after taking a course of antibiotics, in times of stress or if you have problems such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), a stomach bug or inflammation of the bowel such as ulcerative colitis.

What are probiotics?

Probiotics are food supplements which contain 'good' or 'friendly' bacteria. When taken in adequate amounts it is thought that they can improve the balance of the bacteria in the gut.

Probiotics are added to some foods or can be taken as dietary supplements in the form of capsules, tablets and powders.

The most common probiotics that are thought to benefit some people with IBS come from two strains of bacteria: Lactobacilli and Bifidobacteria.

What is the difference between a probiotic and a prebiotic?

Prebiotics are different to probiotics. Prebiotics are food ingredients which are not digested and affect the gut by encouraging the growth and/or activity of the 'good' bacteria in the gut. In other words prebiotics are food for the 'good' bacteria in the gut which encourages them to grow. Some products contain a combination of pre and probiotics and these are known as synbiotics.
How do probiotics work?

When probiotics are eaten the 'good' bacteria they contain competes with the 'bad' bacteria for space within the gut.

This leads to reduced numbers of 'bad' bacteria. The 'good' bacteria in probiotics digest fibre from our diet producing substances known as short chain fatty acids (SCFA). SCFAs help keep the lining of our gut healthy.

It is also thought that probiotics can help our immune system to work better.

Are probiotics helpful with the symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

Probiotics are thought to be helpful in managing IBS symptoms such as pain, bloating and altered bowel habits, especially diarrhoea. There is some evidence about the benefits of different probiotics in IBS but there is further work to be done.

A recent review by the British Dietetic Association found that there is not yet enough evidence to be able to make specific recommendations about specific probiotics for specific IBS symptoms.
Are there any side effects or risks with taking a probiotic?

Probiotics appear to be safe for most people.

However, people who have a condition where their immune system is affected, such as cancer, HIV or transplant patients, should not take probiotics until they have discussed this with their doctor.

Some probiotics can cause wind or bloating when you start to take them. This should disappear after a few days and you may need to reduce the dose until these symptoms have settled.

If any side effects continue you should stop taking them.

What should I try if I want to see if probiotics help my symptoms?

Although there is not enough evidence available yet to make specific recommendations about specific probiotics to use for different symptoms, there are many different probiotics available and it can be difficult to decide which to try. On the following page is a list of some of the symptoms of IBS and the probiotics with some evidence to support their use to help with these symptoms.

A minimum four week trial is recommended as it can take some time to see the benefits. You should also monitor the effect of your symptoms to find out if it is helping. It may be useful for you to keep a ‘food and symptom diary’ to help you to do this. Currently it is advised that if after this time there is no improvement, you can consider using a different brand or strain of bacteria as the type of bacteria used varies between products and may have different effects on symptoms.

When choosing a probiotic, it is probably sensible to try one that is easy to buy and is cheaper first.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom experienced</th>
<th>Probiotic(s) with some evidence of benefit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General reduction symptoms</td>
<td>B infantis 35624 (Alflorex/Align*), LAB4, PMO-076 (Symprove)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abdominal pain</td>
<td>Activia, Align (Bifantis), BC30 (Digestive Advantage Gas Defense Formula), Lactibiane, Lactobacillus reuteri Protectis (Reuterin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>General reduction in symptoms in people with IBS with diarrhoea</td>
<td>B infantis 35624 (Alflorex/Align*)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduction in bloating in people with IBS with diarrhoea</td>
<td>VSL#3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help improve frequency and / or consistency of bowel movements</td>
<td>Activia, B infantis 35624 (Alflorex/Align*), LAB4, Lactibiane</td>
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<tr>
<td>General reduction in symptoms in people with IBS with constipation</td>
<td>Activia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constipation</td>
<td>Activia</td>
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* This product is called Alflorex in Europe and Align in the US
Patient’s name

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This information has been given to you by

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Contact number

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