

# Probiotics — A Patient Guide

Who should be careful, who should avoid them, and when to call a clinician. This sheet is educational and does not replace personal medical advice.

## WHO SHOULD AVOID PROBIOTICS — talk to a clinician first

Probiotics are usually safe for healthy people, but in some situations they have caused serious infections or other harm. **Do not start a probiotic without medical advice if any of the following apply to you:**

- **You have a central venous catheter, port, or PICC line.** The yeast probiotic *Saccharomyces boulardii* can spread from the air onto a line and cause a bloodstream infection.
- **You are severely immunocompromised** — for example: organ or stem-cell transplant, neutropenia, active chemotherapy, advanced HIV (CD4 below 200), or daily prednisone of 20 mg or more.
- **You have a mechanical or prosthetic heart valve, or recent valve surgery.** Probiotic bacteria have caused heart-valve infections (endocarditis) in case reports.
- **You have severe acute pancreatitis.** A large clinical trial (PROPATRIA, 2008) found that multi-strain probiotics **doubled the risk of dying** in this setting.
- **You have short bowel syndrome** or a recent bowel surgery with a fresh anastomosis or fistula. High-dose *Lactobacillus* products can cause a rare condition called D-lactic acidosis.
- **You are caring for a premature baby** — probiotics in NICUs must be a pharmaceutical-grade product given under a hospital protocol; never give a regular store-bought supplement to a preterm infant.

## USE WITH CAUTION — discuss with your clinician

- Age 75 or older, or living in a care home with frailty.
- Low-dose steroids, biologics, or stable HIV with CD4  $\geq$  200.
- Pregnancy, or infants under 12 months.
- Recent uncomplicated GI surgery or active inflammatory bowel disease.

## USUALLY OK — for healthy people

If none of the situations above apply, probiotics are generally well tolerated. Mild gas or bloating in the first week is common and usually settles. Choose a product that lists the **specific strain** (letters and numbers after the species name) and that is third-party verified (USP, NSF, or ConsumerLab).

# Red-flag symptoms — when to contact a clinician

These symptoms are uncommon, but if any occur while you are taking a probiotic, stop the product and seek medical help.

## CALL EMERGENCY SERVICES NOW (911 / 112 / 999)

- Fever above 38.5 °C (101.3 °F) with shaking chills.
- Trouble breathing, chest pain, or fast heartbeat.
- Confusion, slurred speech, severe drowsiness, or trouble walking (loss of balance / ataxia).
- Signs of shock: cold and clammy skin, low blood pressure, fainting.
- A new heart murmur with fever (especially if you have a heart-valve replacement).

## CONTACT YOUR CLINICIAN TODAY

- Diarrhea that is severe, bloody, or lasts more than 48 hours.
- Severe abdominal pain or persistent vomiting.
- New or worsening rash, swelling of the lips or face, or itching all over.
- Redness, pain, swelling, or pus around any catheter, port, or line.
- Unexpected weight loss, night sweats, or fatigue.
- Symptoms that started within a few days of beginning a new probiotic and are not improving.

## What to do before you call

- **Stop the probiotic** and keep the bottle.
- Write down the **brand name, strain (the letter/number code), lot number, dose, and the dates** you took it.
- Tell the clinician you have been taking a probiotic — many bloodstream infections from probiotics are missed because the lab does not know to look for them.
- If your symptoms are serious, ask the lab to specifically identify any *Lactobacillus*, *Bifidobacterium*, or *Saccharomyces* in cultures.

## Reporting a side effect

Even mild reactions are worth reporting — clusters of similar reactions are how regulators find contaminated or mislabeled products.

- **United States:** FDA MedWatch ([fda.gov/safety/medwatch](https://www.fda.gov/safety/medwatch)) or the FDA Safety Reporting Portal.
- **European Union:** your national food / medicines authority — serious cases are escalated through RASFF.
- **United Kingdom:** MHRA Yellow Card scheme ([yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk](https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk)).
- **Sweden:** Livsmedelsverket (food supplements) or Läkemedelsverket (medicinal products).

Educational material from the Microbiome Course. Not a substitute for personal medical advice. Always discuss new supplements with the clinician who knows your medical history.