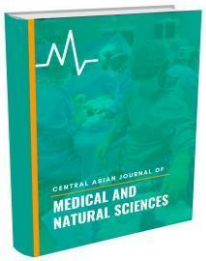

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The Impact of Probiotics on Human Health. A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract: Probiotics are living micro-organisms that when taken in sufficient quantities will give benefits for health. Being widely used in fermented food products and diet supplements, they are more and more studied as a tool for gastrointestinal, immune and metabolic disorders prevention or management. They suggested that their mechanisms of action are inhibition of pathogens, improvement of intestinal barrier function, generation of antimicrobials, and modulation of immune responses. There have been reports of some evidence of benefit from selected strains in regards to reducing some antibiotic associated diarrheas, improving some of the symptoms associated with irritable bowel syndrome and maintaining remission in ulcerative colitis. However, benefits are specific to the strain and not trans-extensible to other products, or diseases. Other formulations in large clinical trials have also failed to yield any benefit. Probiotics are considered to be well-tolerated in individuals who have no underlying health conditions, but also invasive infections can develop in vulnerable patients when given probiotics. This review outlines the mechanisms, potential benefits to health, limitations and safety for the use of probiotics.

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1. Introduction

Probiotics are: "Live microorganisms which when administered in adequate amounts, have a health benefit on the host" [1]. Lactobacillus, Bifidobacterium, Saccharomyces and Escherichia coli strains are the most used microorganisms as probiotics. They can be provided in functional foods such as fermented dairy products, capsules and powders.

Not all fermented food or microorganisms are considered to be probiotics. Any probiotic product should include an established strain and an adequate quantity of live microorganisms, as well as information on a particular health benefit. What can be shown with one strain cannot necessarily be said for another strain, no matter if they are both members of the same species.

But there are some differences in how a person responds to probiotics as well. One study on gastrointestinal colonization revealed that the probiotics used colonized the intestinal mucosa in some, while being rejected by the resident microbiota of others [2]. Hence, treatment response could be dependent on host factors and the composition of the original microbiome.

2. Materials and Methods

This article was prepared as a comprehensive narrative review of published evidence on probiotics and their relevance to human health. The review focused on probiotic definitions, mechanisms of action, clinical effects, safety concerns, limitations, and future research directions. The selected literature included consensus statements, randomized controlled trials, clinical studies, and regulatory safety information relevant to probiotic use.

Literature was identified from peer-reviewed scientific publications and authoritative documents dealing with probiotics, gut microbiota, gastrointestinal health, immune modulation, antibiotic-associated diarrhea, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, acute gastroenteritis, allergy, and probiotic safety. Priority was given to studies that clearly identified probiotic strains, clinical indications, patient populations, reported outcomes, and safety considerations.

The inclusion criteria consisted of sources that discussed probiotic mechanisms, evaluated clinical benefits or limitations, or addressed safety issues in healthy and vulnerable populations. Sources were excluded when they did not distinguish probiotics from general fermented foods, lacked strain-specific information, or did not provide relevant evidence for the health outcomes discussed in this review.

The extracted information was synthesized thematically into four main areas: mechanisms of probiotic action, effects on human health, safety and limitations, and future directions. Because this study is a review based on previously published literature and did not involve direct recruitment of human participants, laboratory procedures, or clinical intervention, no ethical approval or informed consent was required.

3. Results and Discussion

Mechanisms of Probiotic Action

Probiotics can exert a variety of effects on human health. They have the ability to compete for nutrients and sites of attachment, synthesize bacteriocins and organic acids and lower the intestinal pH. Such activity could prevent the proliferation of pathogens. Some strains have been shown to increase intestinal barrier tightness, mucus production, and decrease trans-intestinal transfer of microbial products. Other effects of probiotics have been their interaction with cells of the intestinal immune system and modulation of their inflammatory or anti-inflammatory cytokines production. Some probiotics are able to produce short chain fatty acids (SCFA) or alter the metabolic activity of indigenous microbes. But colonization isn't necessarily the permanent sort. Numerous probiotics can transitorily reside in the gastrointestinal tract and may be metabolically and/or immunologically active for a short period of time.

It is not possible to expect that probiotics will automatically correct microbiome issues after antibiotic treatments. An empiric probiotic mixture was associated with a delay in the reacquisition of the original intestinal microbiome in one controlled trial as opposed to spontaneous reacquisition and AFT [3].

Effects on Human Health

A. Antibiotic-Associated Diarrhea

Diarrhea can occur as a side effect of antibiotics which disrupt the gut flora. Certain probiotic formulations have been shown to be beneficial in some clinical trials. Antibiotic-associated diarrhea was not seen as often in hospitalized patients given an antibiotic drink containing certain strains of bacteria [4].

Nevertheless, results have not been consistent. A study performed in older in-patient populations, which was sufficiently large (PLACIDE) to register a significant effect, saw no evidence that a preparation containing lactobacilli and bifidobacteria significantly

prevented antibiotic-associated diarrhea or Clostridioides difficile diarrhea [5]. These divergent data highlight that effectiveness varies with antibiotic type, patient population, dose, and timing of administration.

B. Irritable Bowel Syndrome

The use of probiotics to help the abdominal discomfort, bloating and bowel changes of irritable bowel syndrome have been studied. An appropriate dosage of Bifidobacterium infantis 35624 was shown to have a beneficial effect on several symptoms of women with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) by a randomized trial [6].

But there have been inconsistencies in results of research into other strains and doses. Thus, probiotics might be advantageous to some patients, but should not be used as an all-purpose remedy.

C. Inflammatory Bowel Disease

The gut flora plays a role in initiation and maintenance of gut inflammation. A randomized trial showed that the probiotic strain E. coli Nissle 1917 was similar to Mesalazine of maintaining remission in selected patients in ulcerative colitis [7].

This outcome in response to a particular strain/clinical circumstances. Results on probiotics in the active disease have been inconsistent in both ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease and probiotics should not be used as a substitute for established anti-inflammatory and/or immunomodulatory therapy without medical supervision.

D. Acute Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis in children often has been suggested as a target for probiotics. A large randomized study of 886 children, however, did not show a significant decrease in moderate to severe gastroenteritis with the use of a combination of Lactobacillus rhamnosus R0011 and Lactobacillus helveticus R0052 when compared with placebo [8]. This discovery underscores the fact that being 'available on the market' does not automatically mean that it is 'clinically effective'.

E. Allergy and Immune Health

Probiotics in early life have been tested to reduce the occurrence of allergic diseases. A randomized trial showed a decrease of early atopic eczema in high-risk children given lactobacillus rhamnosus GG in the perinatal period [9]. However, follow-on research has yielded mixed findings, and it cannot be easily recommended to take the supplement on a regular basis and prevent all allergic diseases. The overall suggestion of a “strengthening effect on immunity” of probiotics is also lacking in evidence. Immune effects vary, depending on the organism involved and can be set against on a case-by-case basis depending on the period of time for which the treatment is given and the health and age of the human proposition.

Table 1. Summary of selected clinical evidence.

Health condition	Reported effect	Overall interpretation
Antibiotic-associated diarrhea	Benefit in some trials but not others	Strain- and population-specific
Irritable bowel syndrome	Possible reduction in pain and bloating	Modest and inconsistent benefit
Ulcerative colitis	Selected strains may maintain remission	Not applicable to every probiotic
Acute childhood gastroenteritis	No significant benefit in a large trial	Routine use is not supported
Allergic disease	Possible benefit in selected high-risk infants	Evidence remains inconsistent

Safety and Limitations

Healthy adult individuals usually do not experience any issues when taking probiotics. The most frequent side effects are mild gastrointestinal symptoms such as gas, bloating and transient gastrointestinal reactions. Premature babies, critically ill patients and immunocompromised patients as well as patients with central venous catheter should be treated with greater caution. However, a large phase III study of Bifidobacterium breve BBG-001 in very preterm infants did not show a significant decrease in necrotizing enterocolitis, sepsis or mortality [10]. Moreover, the FDA has also issued a warning that live microorganisms in probiotics can also trigger invasive and life-threatening infections in premature infants [11]. Other concerns are contamination of the product, errors in labeling, loss of viability in storage, and differences between different formulations manufactured and the ones studied clinically.

Future Directions

Future research needs to determine the most effective probiotic strain for each condition, dose, formulation and treatment period. Standardized outcomes, longer safety monitoring, and accurate strain identification should be included in clinical trials [12], [13]. The use of personalized probiotic therapy can predict patient response to treatment based on baseline microbiome, diet, age, medication use and genetic characteristics. There are also some controlled alternative forms of probiotics in the form of defined microbial communities, synbiotics and postbiotics [14], [15].

4. Conclusion

Probiotics have been shown to affect intestinal microbial activity, epithelial integrity and immune responses. Some strains have been selected for their benefits in certain conditions, such as some types of antibiotic-associated diarrhea, irritable bowel syndrome, and ulcerative colitis. But impacts are not universal and it is not transferable between products. In this context, Probiotics should be assessed based on the specific strain, dose, clinical indication and patient population. They are relatively safe for the healthy, but for the vulnerable, their use should be supervised medically and be more strictly regulated.

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