Probiotics? Prebiotics? What are the benefits and how do we pick one?

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There's been a lot of hype recently about the benefits of probiotics and prebiotics. And rightly so, these healthy bacteria keep our digestive system balanced, healthy and in optimal condition. When our digestive system works like it should, many symptoms and issues disappear. This month, I invited guest blogger, Doron Kahana, MD, CPNS to help me bring the best advice for Smart Life readers.

Sure, they're both "Biotics", but what do "Pro" and "Pre" mean?

Probiotics are live microorganisms that benefit your body. Usually either bacteria or yeast, they boost immunity, aid digestion and promote regularity. If it sounds strange to consume "good bacteria" to stay healthy, consider that more than 400 different types of happy bacteria already live in your GI tract. No joke.

Prebiotics are functional foods that can be used by healthy bacteria for nourishment. A fancy word for fiber, prebiotics promote a healthy microecology, or the composition of the intestinal microflora, in our body. Prebiotics are naturally found in onions, garlic, flaxseeds, whole-grain breads, beans and other high-fiber foods.

Probiotic benefits

I recommend probiotics because they are preventive powerhouses that enhance digestion, strengthen the immune system, rev the

metabolism, and ensure detoxification and elimination. Not bad, huh? Especially because the safety profile of probiotics is excellent, with minimal adverse effects reported even with very large doses.

The 3 most common issues

Researchers believe we're only beginning to discover how valuable pre- and probiotics can be to our bodies. Whether or not you're prone to the conditions below, consider that many things – stress, anxiety, fatigue, junk food – can put a strain on our system. Here are just a few benefits:

1. It treats UTIs, vaginitis and yeast infections. These conditions arise when there's an imbalance in good and bad bacteria. Probiotics, when taken daily, regulate the balance so unhealthy situations don't spring up.
2. It reduces the severity and frequency of colds. Healthy bacteria bolster your immune system and keep sickness at bay.
3. It alleviates constipation, diarrhea and IBS. Studies have shown probiotics are a natural and effective way to reduce and/or eliminate the symptoms like pain, bloating, discomfort and irregular bowel movements.

How to pick a Probiotic

Before buying, determine:

- **What type of bacteria it contains**, including the genus (first letter/word) and species (second word). Some types include: L. acidophilus, L. bulgaricus, L. casei, L. gasseri, L. plantarum, Bifidobacterium bifidum, B. lactis, B. longum, Saccharomyces boulardii. The more types of bacteria, the better, since different strains benefit your body in different ways.
- **How many bacteria per dose it contains.** You want at least 2 to 10 billion. If a brand doesn't list

potency, that’s a red flag not to buy. S. boulardii may sometime be listed in milligrams, choose 250 mg or more.

- **How pure is the dose.** Does it have additives or unhealthy bacteria? The cultivation and purification process varies considerably. Some higher grade products will request that you keep the probiotics refrigerated, others will be blister-packed to ensure freshness. Except for S. boulardii, which has a darker, sandy color, probiotics should look white (like sugar). Expect the scent and taste to be pleasant and not offensive.
- **What research or reviews say about the product.** ConsumerLab.com, for example, is an excellent resource for finding out which supplements are effective. Stay with reputable brands and shy away from discount offers. In this instance, there’s a reason they’re on sale. Good quality probiotics usually cost upward of $1 a day.