

# “Contains Live & Active Cultures” Ever wondered what that means?



Have you ever wondered what stands behind the little label on your yogurt container saying “Contains live & active cultures?” You are not the first to ask. Interest in the role of live cultures, also known as probiotics, for human health dates back to the beginning of the 20th century (1908) when the Nobel Prize winning Russian scientist, Elie Metchnikoff, linked the long, healthy life of Bulgarian peasants to their high intake of fermented milk products containing lactic acid producing microorganisms (1,2). He theorized that the lactic acid bacteria in fermented milk displace undesirable bacteria

normally present in the intestine, resulting in a healthier life. In recent years, there has been a plethora of published scientific studies examining the health attributes of probiotics, especially those related to gastrointestinal health and immunity.

Probiotics are living microorganisms that when consumed in sufficient amounts provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition (1).

Probiotic cultures are intended to assist the body's naturally occurring gut flora, which is extremely complex and diverse and contains more than 400 different species of bacteria.

While the majority of these bacteria are non-pathogenic, some may potentially cause disease. In healthy individuals, there is a balance of bacteria. However, disrupting this balance through stress, infection, antibiotic therapy can lead to proliferation of undesirable or pathogenic microbes and increased risk of clinical disorders such as inflammatory diseases, infectious illnesses, and others (3).

Increasing scientific evidence indicates that consumption of probiotics can help maintain a healthy microbial population, resulting in several therapeutic benefits (4,5).



Some of those health benefits include but are not limited to the alleviation of the symptoms for lactose intolerance, the improvement in mineral absorption such as calcium, the prevention and treatment of a variety of diarrheal illnesses, the protection against infection, as well as the reduction in risk of colon cancer and irritable bowel syndrome. Consumption of probiotics has also shown to improve the immune system. More detailed information on the health benefits of probiotics can be found at

<http://www.nationaldairycouncil.org/NationalDairyCouncil/Health/Digest/dcd76-1Page3.htm>

To optimize the health of your gut flora it is best to combine a diet rich in probiotics with prebiotics, which are food substances that help promote the growth of the probiotic bacteria. Prebiotics are found in fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

One last thing, when you purchase yogurt make sure that you check the label. It should say "Live & Active Cultures" \*\* Meets National Yogurt Association Criteria for Live and Active Culture Yogurt. Now you know what that label means. Enjoy!

#### References:

1. Sanders, M.E. *Nutr. Rev.* 61: 91, 2003.
2. Sanders, M.E., *J. Nutr.* 130: 384s, 2000.
3. Brown, A.C., and A. Valiere. *Nutr. Clin. Care* 7: 56, 2004.
4. Goossens, D., D. Jonkers, E. Stobberingh, et al. *Scand. J. Gastroenterol.* 38(suppl. #239): 15, 2003.
5. Reid, G., J. Jass, M.T. Sebuly, et al. *Clin. Microbiol. Rev.* 16: 658, 2003.