



The nutritional role of prebiotics

by **Pixie Stevenson**

Prebiotics are simply fiber, the non-digestible ingredients in many foods. What prebiotics do is feed the good bacteria already in your gastrointestinal (GI) tract as well as feed any probiotic¹ supplements you may be taking.

The chemical names for the two best known prebiotics are inulin and oligosaccharides. Both are carbohydrates. Stop! Don't get excited about the carbs! Put down that cookie! These are not the carbs you find in cookies, cakes and bread. Inulin and oligosaccharides are the carbs found in whole, unrefined grains and plant sources.

Knowing the chemical names of prebiotics isn't as important as knowing why they're good for you and in which foods you can find them.

Prebiotics are good for you from the day you are born. A baby's immune system gets a jump-start by the many prebiotics contained in human breast milk. Then all through your life prebiotics feed the good bacteria in your GI tract contributing to healthy digestion and assimilation of nutrients. They pass through the small intestine and arrive in the large intestine (your colon) where they are available to nourish the bacteria needed for a healthy colorectal system. The benefits of prebiotics include, but are not limited to:

- * reduces cholesterol
- * reduces risk of colorectal disease
- * enhances immune system
- * increases calcium and magnesium absorption
- * reduces diarrhea
- * relieves constipation
- * reduces lactose intolerance
- * protects infants from eczema and dermatitis

Prebiotic supplements are available; however, there are many foods that contain prebiotics naturally; foods which should already be in your diet for other healthy reasons. Which foods contain prebiotics?

- * bananas
- * berries
- * chicory
- * Jerusalem artichokes
- * dandelion greens and other dark leafy green vegetables
- * soybeans
- * flax seeds
- * whole, unrefined grains
- * onions
- * leeks
- * garlic
- * legumes (lentils, black beans, kidney beans, navy beans)

There are only a couple words of caution. Prebiotics may cause gas and bloating in some people who are increasing their intake of fiber in their diet. Some studies suggest that the effectiveness of prebiotics is decreased in the presence of glucose, sucrose and fructose.

This article is meant to be informative only and does not constitute medical advice. If you have a pre-existing medical condition, always check with your doctor before making any dietary changes or taking

nutritional supplements.

1 Probiotics are live bacteria and yeast added or found in foods such as yogurt and tempeh. Probiotics supplement the already live bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract. Not all yogurt contains live cultures, so read the labels carefully.

Sources:

Inulin. Wikipedia, Retrieved Nov. 10, 2007, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inulin>

Prebiotics (Nutrition), Retrieved Nov. 8, 2007, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prebiotic_\(nutrition\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prebiotic_(nutrition))

Sahelian, R., M.D., Prebiotics. Retrieved Nov. 9, 2007, from <http://www.raysahelian.com/prebiotic.html>

Prebiotics. Innvista. Retrieved Nov. 9, 2007, from <http://www.innvista.com/HEALTH/nutrition/biotics/prebiot.htm>

Dixon, S., M.P.H., M.S., R.D. Prebiotics and probiotics: what are they and why should I eat them? Progress - Spring 2002, University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center. Retrieved Nov. 9, 2007, from <http://www.cancer.med.umich.edu/news/pro09spr02.htm>

Gates, D. Why prebiotics are essential to your heart, health & immune system. Body Ecology Diet. Retrieved Nov. 11, 2007, from http://bodyecology.com/07/02/08/prebiotics_essential_to_heart_health.php

Prebiotics. Food Info-Net. Retrieved Nov. 8, 2007, from <http://www.food-info.net/uk/ff/prebiotics.htm>

Probiotics, U.S. Pharmacist, Retrieved Nov. 10, 2007, from http://www.uspharmacist.com/index.asp?show=article &page=8_1216.htm

June 2006. Functional foods fact sheet: probiotics and prebiotics. Retrieved Nov. 10, 2007, from <http://www.ific.org/publications/factsheets/preprobioticsfs.cfm>

Copyright © 2002-2008 Helium, Inc. All rights reserved.