



Naturopath Emily Kane answers a few questions that come up time and again at health food stores

health food store FAQs

By Emily Kane, ND, LAc

I hang out at the health food store near my office on a regular basis. Not only can I get vibrant organic produce, bulk staples, and treats free of trans fats and artificial colors there, but I also learn a lot about what folks are doing on a day-to-day basis to commit to health and wellness. Questions always come up from shoppers. Here, we've picked out and answered a few of the most frequently asked ones.

1. What exactly are probiotics?

Probiotics can sometimes be understood as the opposite of antibiotics, but really the term covers much more territory. In general, probiotics are a host of healthful bacteria that help break down and assimilate food; they live in the mucous membrane-covered tube that runs from your mouth to your rectum.

To understand the importance of probiotics, it helps to first learn some digestion basics. For several reasons,

the pH (acidity) of the stomach should reach 1 or 2 (much more than vinegar) when filled with food. (The stomach is designed to be very acidic, especially right after eating.) First, the acid helps break down protein into amino acids, building blocks of the body's cells and tissues. Second, the stomach acid helps sterilize food so pathogenic bugs don't infect the gut or get into the bloodstream. Third, without an acidic mass of chewed food passing into the upper small intestine, the pancreas is not adequately triggered to secrete pancreatic enzymes (amylase and lipase) or neutralizing bicarbonate of soda (broken down food must have a neutral pH, around 7.4, before it can be absorbed into the blood). The pancreas also does not secrete insulin properly without adequate stomach acid. Most bacteria do not live in the stomach due to the acid, but can "ride on food" through the stomach to the small and then large intestine.

Here's where probiotics come in: Acid-loving probiotics (e.g., *Lactobacillus acidophilus*) live up high in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. The pH of the colon is about 9, and thus harbors a completely different species of probiotics: bifidobacterium. Unfortunately, many antibiotics kill not only bad bugs but also good bugs that live in the GI tract. Killing off the healthful probiotics not only compromises the ability to properly digest and absorb nutrients from your food, but also promotes the overgrowth of fungal species, such as candida. A certain amount of candida is normal in the gut, but it must be kept in balance with probiotics. Health is almost always about balance and moderation.

Look for probiotics with multiple species and at least 5 billion microorganisms per dose. There should also be a strain name for the main probiotics in the formula, such as DDS-1 or NCFM. Many good probiotics also contain FOS, which "feed" the probiotics and help get them established in your gut.

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2. What is the best way to cleanse the body and improve regularity?

Cleansing generally starts with bowel elimination, which is our primary mode of daily detoxification. On any day you do not have a bowel movement, consider taking an herbal laxative at bedtime. There are many herbal laxatives and they can be fairly harsh. The active ingredient of bowel stimulants is often a phytochemical called anthraquinone, which is found in many herbs, although senna is the safest to use without medical supervision. Use the smallest recommended dose and gradually increase every two to three days until regular bowel movements occur. Continue for five to 10 days to maintain regularity, then decrease the dose every two to three days to avoid dependence. Do not go more than two days without a bowel movement.

Another way to promote regularity is by consuming soaked prunes or figs daily—just soak in plain water and keep, covered, in the fridge.

There are many excellent cleansing/detox programs available at health food stores, and most will offer bowel-, liver-, lymph-, lung-, kidney-, and skin-cleansing phases. Health food store employees, particularly those who have been working in the industry for a few years, may have tried these products themselves. You can also work with local nutritionists or naturopaths to choose a range of high-quality products.

3. What do the terms “build the blood” and “stagnation” mean?

Blood building, in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), refers to building the nutritive fluids of the body for all tissues, including reversing anemia. Often a woman who menstruates heavily will become anemic. Of course, more serious causes of blood loss, such as

internal hemorrhage, can quickly cause anemia and must be treated as an emergency.

Blood is created in the bone marrow, and requires optimal intake of iron-rich foods including meat, cooked spinach, kale, sea vegetables, sardines, red grapes, and the herb yellow dock. Plant tannins, found in high concentration in black tea, will bind iron and should not be consumed at the same time as iron-containing food or supplements if you are anemic and trying to build your blood. Supplemental iron, about 25–50 mg daily, is also very helpful. I prefer liquid forms of iron as they tend to cause less constipation, a common side effect of ferrous sulfate iron. If you are only mildly anemic, you can cook in cast-iron cookware or take supplemental iron during your menses only. Do not take iron unless you have a proven iron deficiency because excess iron can promote viral infections. People with HIV or hepatitis C should be cautious about supplementing with iron.

Stagnation is another principal pathology in TCM. Disease, or lack of health, is thought to be caused by stagnation of “qi” (pronounced “chee”) and body fluids. You can think of this as impedance in the flow of blood, nerve conductivity, gastric juices, or just a broader concept of internal energy stagnation. The main purpose of acupuncture needles is to restimulate the flow of qi, which means vital energy. Naturopaths call it the “vis,” short for *vis medicatrix naturae*—Latin for the healing power of nature. ♦

