



# Prebiotics vs. Probiotics:

## What's the Difference and Why Do We Need Them?

Last week we talked about the importance of eating a diverse diet for your microbiome. This week, let's dive a little deeper into two key players in gut health: *prebiotics* and *probiotics*. While the names sound similar, they play very different roles in keeping your digestive system thriving.

**Probiotics: The friendly bacteria.** Probiotics are live microorganisms, mostly bacteria and some yeasts, that provide health benefits when consumed in adequate amounts. They work primarily in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, where they help fortify the microbiome. Once the probiotics successfully colonize (or even just pass through) the gut and integrate into your gut's microbial community, they're no longer considered "probiotics"; they become part of the gut microbiota itself. Think of them as the "good guys" that support digestion, keep harmful microbes in check, and strengthen the immune system. A healthy and diverse microbiome can reduce bloating, improve nutrient absorption, and even influence mental health through the gut-brain connection.

You can find probiotics naturally in fermented foods such as yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, tempeh, kimchi, miso, and kombucha. However, not all probiotics are the same. Different foods contain different strains, and different strains provide different benefits, so variety in your diet is key. Some common probiotic names to look out for include *Lactobacillus*, *Bifidobacterium*, *Saccharomyces boulardii* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*.

Probiotic supplements can also be a convenient way to support gut health, especially if you don't regularly eat fermented foods. To find a high-quality option, look for products that list specific strains and their amounts (measured in Colony Forming Units or CFUs), and choose brands that are third-party tested for purity and potency (1).

Be sure to follow storage directions, as some probiotic supplements require refrigeration, while others are shelf-stable. However, keeping all probiotic foods in the fridge helps preserve the live, active cultures that give them their health benefits. Without proper refrigeration, many probiotic strains can lose potency and become less effective over time.

**Prebiotics: The fuel for probiotics.** Prebiotics are specialized plant fibers that act as food for probiotics and other beneficial gut microbes. Without prebiotics, probiotics wouldn't thrive. Think of prebiotics as fertilizer for your gut garden: they help healthy bacteria grow and multiply.

Prebiotics are found naturally in fiber-rich foods such as beans (think lentils, chickpeas, black beans, etc.), garlic, onions, leeks, asparagus, bananas (especially slightly green ones), oats, barley, apples, and chicory root. Unlike probiotics, prebiotics are not destroyed by heat or stomach acid, making them more resilient as they travel through the digestive system. They are not digested in the small intestine but are fermented by gut bacteria, promoting the growth of beneficial microbes like *Bifidobacterium* and *Lactobacillus*. Prebiotics also support nutrient absorption, reduce the risk of allergies, and help strengthen the immune system (2).

**Why do we need both?** Probiotics supply helpful bacteria into the gut, while prebiotics ensure those bacteria have the nourishment they need to survive and flourish. Together, they create a balanced microbiome, a thriving community of microorganisms that supports digestion, immunity, metabolism, and even mood regulation. Without this balance, issues like bloating, constipation, weakened immunity, or inflammation may arise.

**How to incorporate them into your diet:** A great way to support your gut health is to incorporate both prebiotic and probiotic foods into your daily meals. Here are some gut-friendly combo ideas:

- Oatmeal with yogurt (probiotic) and slightly green banana (prebiotic)
- Whole-grain toast (prebiotic) with avocado and kefir drizzle (probiotic)
- Apple slices (prebiotic) with cinnamon yogurt dip (probiotic)
- Asparagus and leek (prebiotic) stir-fry with a miso-based sauce (probiotic)
- Chicory root (prebiotic) salad with sauerkraut (probiotic)
- Garlic, onions, and lentils (prebiotics) with yogurt curry (probiotic)
- Fermented pickles (probiotic)\* with roasted garlic sweet potatoes (prebiotic)

**The bottom line:** Prebiotics and probiotics aren't just wellness buzzwords; they're essential partners in maintaining a healthy digestive system. By including both in your diet, you can nurture a balanced gut microbiome that supports not only digestion but also your overall health.

# Fermented Veggie Bowl with Roasted Garlic Sweet Potatoes



This bowl pairs prebiotic-rich sweet potatoes and garlic with probiotic-packed fermented veggies and yogurt, making it a delicious way to support a healthy gut microbiome.

## Ingredients (serves 2-3):

- 2 medium sweet potatoes, cubed (prebiotic)
- 3 cloves garlic, minced (prebiotic)
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- Salt & pepper, to taste
- 1/2 tsp smoked paprika or cumin (optional)
- 1 cup fermented vegetables (pickles, kimchi, or sauerkraut) (probiotic)
- Fresh parsley or dill, chopped, for garnish

## Dressing:

- 1/4 cup plain yogurt (probiotic)
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- 1/2 tsp Dijon mustard
- Fresh parsley or dill, chopped, for garnish

## Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Toss sweet potato cubes with olive oil, minced garlic, salt, pepper, and paprika (if using).
3. Spread on a baking sheet in a single layer and roast for 25–30 minutes, stirring halfway, until tender and lightly caramelized.
4. In a small bowl, whisk together yogurt, lemon juice, and Dijon mustard to make the dressing.
5. Arrange roasted sweet potatoes in a bowl. Top with 1 cup of fermented vegetables drizzle with the dressing.
6. Garnish with fresh parsley or dill.

\*Not all pickles are fermented; many are preserved in vinegar, which actually prevents fermentation. True fermented pickles use lacto-fermentation, creating a tangy, sour flavor and cloudy brine; you can find them in the refrigerated section. Look for signs of live cultures or fizzing.

## References:

1. National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements. *Probiotics – Health Professional Fact Sheet*. Updated March 25, 2025. Available at: <https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Probiotics-HealthProfessional/>
2. Carlson JL, Erickson JM, Lloyd BB, Slavin JL. Health Effects and Sources of Prebiotic Dietary Fiber. *Curr Dev Nutr*. 2018 Jan 29;2(3):nzy005. doi: 10.1093/cdn/nzy005. PMID: 30019028; PMCID: PMC6041804.