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Probiotics for irritable bowel syndrome: an evidence-based review

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Background & Aim: Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is the most commonly diagnosed gastrointestinal disorder and is characterized by chronic abdominal pain and altered bowel habits in the absence of any organic cause. Probiotics are microorganisms that have beneficial properties for the host. Initial studies of selected probiotic species have suggested potential efficacy in several gastrointestinal illnesses, including IBS. **Aim:** To determine if probiotics are effective as a treatment for IBS.

Method: Data sources: Pubmed/MEDLINE; National Guidelines Clearinghouse; Canadian Medical Association Practice Guidelines InfoBase; Guidelines Finder of the National Electronic Library for Health in the British NHS; Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness - Centre for Reviews and Dissemination; Bandolier; The Cochrane Library; Evidence-based Medicine - British Medical Journal; TRIPDATABASE.

Review Methods: Systematic Reviews (SR), Meta-analysis (MA), Guidelines and Randomized Clinical Trials published between 01/01/2010 and 26/12/2015 using the MeSH terms 'probiotics', 'irritable bowel syndrome' and 'treatment'. American Family Physician's 'Strength-of-Recommendation Taxonomy' scale was used to assess the quality of the studies and the strength of recommendations.

Results: The search produced a list of 137 articles; 9 articles were included - 8 SR/MA and 1 guideline. The SR/MA showed that probiotics reduce overall symptom burden, particularly abdominal pain, and improve quality of life (EL 2). The NCG guideline state that there is moderate evidence concerning the use of probiotics in IBS; the patient should be advised to take the product for at least 4 weeks in the dose recommended (EL 3).

Conclusions: The authors concluded that the use of probiotics in IBS seems to be beneficial in terms of symptom improvement and quality of life (SORT B). However, results should be interpreted with caution, as longer term trials are needed in order to focus on the type, optimal dose of probiotics and the subgroups of patients who are likely to benefit the most.