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VITAL SIGNS

## Regimens: Diet Supplement Seen as Risky for Some Users

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR

Probiotics, the potentially beneficial bacteria and yeasts available as [diet](#) supplements and in some foods, may not be as helpful as widely believed. A new study suggests that under certain circumstances, they can be deadly.

Researchers studied 296 patients at risk for severe [pancreatitis](#), a potentially lethal inflammation of the pancreas. Each was randomly assigned to receive either a commercially available probiotic or an identical-looking placebo. All patients were otherwise given conventional treatment.

There was no significant difference between the two groups in severity of illness at the start of the trial. But while 31 percent of the probiotics group required intensive care, only 24 percent of the placebo group needed it. Eighteen percent of those who took probiotics, but only 10 percent of the others, required surgical intervention. In the probiotics group 24 people died, a death rate more than twice that of those given the placebo.

Several smaller studies have associated probiotics with a reduction of infections. But this [study](#), published online Thursday in The Lancet, was the largest randomized, double-blinded trial of its kind, and the authors found no other reason for the harmful effects.

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