

## Making Sense of [Dairy-Free] Yogurt Choices

When I walked into Whole Foods the other day (for the first time in months), I was amazed to see a dairy-free yogurt section that rivaled the dairy-rich yogurt section in size and selection. It was a pleasing site to say the least. Yet, with such variety does come the need to know more about what you are buying. Steve over at Planet Lactose featured some information on the various claims on yogurt packages and what they mean, which I think is quite helpful: "An article by the American Institute for Cancer Research on FoodConsumer.org offers a quick tutorial on the multitude of claims that yogurts are making. Here's a shortened version ..."

**Probiotics.** All yogurts provide probiotics, live microorganisms (bacteria) that confer a wide range of potential health benefits. Research tentatively supports using probiotics to help resolve diarrhea and symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, as well as to enhance immune system functions and reduce susceptibility to infections. But not all types of probiotic bacteria offer identical benefits. In the U.S., the starter bacteria for yogurt cultures (*L bulgaricus* and *S thermophilus*) have been shown to help with lactose intolerance, but research does not provide convincing evidence of the other proposed benefits.

**Prebiotics.** Several yogurt manufacturers now go a step further by adding prebiotics to their products. Prebiotics are carbohydrates that feed probiotic bacteria, supporting their growth or activity. Some types of dietary fiber are classified as prebiotics, but it's not as simple as just looking for fiber on the Nutrition Facts panel. Prebiotics added to yogurt include inulin (made from chicory or table sugar), soy oligosaccharides and some types of maltodextrins and modified food starch. And don't assume that prebiotics are listed on all labels; some yogurts contain one or more prebiotics without identifying the ingredient to the consumer. Other yogurts correctly note that they contain prebiotics, but each serving may contain only a quarter to a half of the amount that research identifies as effective.

**Omega-3s and plant sterols.** Omega-3 fats and sterols that promote heart health are now added to some yogurts. Omega-3 fat, which has received much attention for its purported role in reducing heart disease, is naturally abundant in fatty fish like salmon and mackerel. While yogurts fortified with omega-3s may convey some benefit, they often contain less than 10 percent of the amount found in a standard serving of salmon. Alternatively, many yogurts contain the plant form of omega-3s (the type of essential fatty acid supplied by flax), which does not seem nearly as potent as the compound found in seafood.