NOVA MICROBIOME

How to Read a Probiotic Label

The one-page cheat sheet. Size up any bottle in ten seconds.

A probiotic label is built to make one number look impressive and hide the parts that matter. Here is the whole skill on one page. Keep it on your phone for the supplement aisle.

1. The three-part name (the strain is what counts)

Probiotic bacteria have three parts to their name. The code at the very end is the part cheap products leave off, and it is the only part tied to actual research.

Lactobacillus (genus, the broad family) · **rhamnosus** (species) · **GG** (strain, the tested variety)

> **The single best test:** does the label name the strain with letters or numbers after the species, like GG, 35624, CNCM I-745, or DSM 9843? If yes, you can look up whether that exact strain was studied. If it only says "Lactobacillus acidophilus" with no code, you cannot verify anything. Assume the marketing is doing the work.

2. What CFU really means

CFU (colony-forming units) just counts live bacteria per serving. Two traps hide behind the big number:

- **Bigger is not better.** A well-studied strain at 1 billion CFU routinely beats a random strain at 100 billion. Match the dose to what the trial used, not to the biggest number on the shelf.
- **"At manufacture" vs "through expiration."** Live bacteria die over time. Look for CFU guaranteed **through the expiration date**, not just at the time it was made.

3. The tricks to ignore

- **Proprietary blend** with no per-strain amounts. You cannot tell if any strain hits its studied dose.
- **Sky-high CFU as the headline.** A giant number in a big font is a marketing choice, not a quality signal.
- **Vague "supports gut, immunity, and mood."** Benefits are strain-specific. Broad body-wide claims usually mean the specific evidence is thin.
- **No third-party testing.** Independent verification that the bottle contains what it claims is a real plus, and its absence is common.

Strains with real evidence, by goal

Goal	Strain to look for on the label
Everyday, single strain	*Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG
IBS-type bloating (evidence mixed)	*Bifidobacterium infantis* 35624; also *L. plantarum* 299v
Antibiotic-associated diarrhea	*Saccharomyces boulardii* CNCM I-745 (a yeast)

Diagnosed IBD or pouchitis (with a doctor)	De Simone 8-strain formula

Evidence is strain-specific and, for bloating, genuinely mixed. Match the strain to a goal where studies exist, and treat any probiotic for a functional gut issue as a low-risk 4-week trial, not a cure.

Your 10-second checklist

1. Is the **strain code** printed (letters or numbers after the species)?
2. Does that strain match one **studied for your goal**?
3. Is CFU **guaranteed through expiration**, not just at manufacture?
4. Can you see **per-strain amounts**, not just a blend total?
5. Is there **third-party testing**?

Three or more yes = a real product. Mostly no = you are paying for a label.

> **Before you buy anything:** feed the bacteria you already have. Prebiotic fiber and fermented foods do more for most people than any capsule, and they cost less. The pill is step three, not step one.
