

Harnessing Probiotics as a Nexus of Food Safety, Public Health, and Environmental Sustainability

Chinenyenwa M.D. Ohia, Ph.D.^{1,2}, Olutayo I. Falodun, Ph.D.³, Chinyere C. Ezemba, Ph.D.⁴

¹Department of Environmental Health Sciences, Faculty of Public Health, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Queen Elizabeth II Road, Agodi 200285, Ibadan, Oyo State 200284, Nigeria.

²Nanobios Lab, Department of Biosciences and Bioengineering, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay, 400076, India.

³Department of Microbiology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State 200284, Nigeria.

⁴Chychy Gilgal Laboratory and Consulting Services Ichida, Anambra State 422012, Nigeria.

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Abstract:

Probiotics, defined as live microorganisms, provide health advantages when ingested in sufficient quantities. They have progressed from Élie Metchnikoff's early hypothesis of lactic acid bacteria promoting longevity to a scientifically grounded field spanning clinical, nutritional, and environmental domains. Traditionally associated with *Lactobacillus*, *Bifidobacterium*, probiotics now include strains of *Bacillus*, *Pediococcus*, and *Saccharomyces boulardii*, expanding their functional repertoire. Contemporary evidence highlights their roles not only in maintaining gastrointestinal balance but also in allergy management, metabolic regulation, skin health, and modulation of the gut–brain axis. These benefits are mediated through immune modulation, enhancement of intestinal barrier function, and support of microbial diversity. Despite this progress, several challenges remain unresolved, including strain-specific variability, inconsistent efficacy across populations, and safety considerations in vulnerable groups. Additionally, fragmented global regulatory frameworks limit standardization of claims, labeling, and clinical adoption, while the ecological implications and sustainability of large-scale probiotic production are emerging concerns. This review provides a structured synthesis of probiotics in four domains: natural and engineered sources, mechanisms of action, contributions to human health, and broader implications for food safety, public health, and environmental sustainability. Integrating classical insights with recent advances highlights the promise of probiotics as broad-spectrum tools for preventive and therapeutic health. Looking forward, developments in microbiome science, bioengineering, and personalized nutrition offer opportunities to refine probiotic applications. Systematic attention to regulatory harmonization, safety, and sustainability will be critical to unlocking their full potential as cornerstones of modern health strategies.

Contact: Chinenyenwa M.D. Ohia, Ph.D.

Department of Environmental Health Sciences, Faculty of Public Health, College of Medicine,
University of Ibadan, Queen Elizabeth II Road, Agodi 200285, Ibadan, Oyo State, 200284, Nigeria.
E-mail: ohiacmd@gmail.com

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Introduction

Probiotics, often described as “friendly bacteria,” are live microorganisms that, when administered in adequate amounts, confer measurable health benefits to the host¹⁻⁴. Traditionally, the most widely studied probiotic genera include *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, but in recent decades, other microbes such as specific strains of *Bacillus*, *Pedococcus*, and the yeast *Saccharomyces boulardii* have also been recognized for their functional properties^{1,5-7}. The concept of probiotics has a rich historical foundation, tracing back to Élie Metchnikoff’s early 20th-century hypothesis that consumption of lactic acid bacteria (LAB) could promote longevity by modulating intestinal health. This early insight has since expanded into a comprehensive scientific understanding of probiotics as key modulators of the gut microbiota, immune responses, and systemic health outcomes.

Today, probiotics are not only integrated into clinical practice for preventing and managing gastrointestinal disorders, but they are also widely consumed as dietary supplements and functional foods. Their applications extend beyond digestive health to include roles in allergy management, metabolic regulation, mental health through the gut-brain axis, and even skin health^{3,8,9}.

However, despite this growing body of evidence and commercial popularity, significant knowledge gaps persist. Questions remain about the consistency of probiotic efficacy across different populations, optimal dosing strategies, safety in vulnerable groups, such as infants, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals, and the lack of harmonized global regulatory frameworks. Additionally, the contribution of probiotics to sustainable food systems and environmental health is an emerging area of inquiry, particularly as society seeks eco-friendly solutions to health and nutrition challenges.

As a result of this gap, this review provides a structured exploration of probiotics in four domains: (1) their natural and engineered sources, (2) their mechanisms of action in host systems, (3) their contributions to human well-being across different health dimensions, and (4) their broader implications for food safety, public health, and environmental sustainability. By integrating both classical perspectives and contemporary research findings, this review aimed to clarify the evolving role of probiotics and highlight future directions for research, regulation, and practical application.

Probiotics sources and relevance

Probiotics are derived from a variety of natural and industrial sources, with fermented foods serving as one of the most traditional and widely recognized reservoirs. Common examples include yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, and certain types of cheeses, all of which provide a diverse range of beneficial microorganisms that have co-evolved with human dietary practices for centuries. These foods are not only culturally significant across different regions of the world but also serve as accessible vehicles for delivering viable probiotic strains in everyday diets⁷. Beyond naturally fermented products, probiotics are deliberately incorporated into dietary supplements in the form of capsules, powders, sachets, and tablets (Table 1), offering consumers standardized doses and targeted microbial formulations. They are also increasingly embedded into functional foods and beverages such as probiotic-fortified milk, juices, snack bars, and even infant formulas, reflecting the growing demand for convenient, health-promoting products.

From a safety perspective, most probiotic strains have been evaluated and classified as *Generally Recognized as Safe* (GRAS) by regulatory agencies, including the

Table 1 Natural and commercial sources of probiotics

Source	Microorganisms involved	Type	Health relevance
Human Colostrum	<i>Lactobacillus</i> , <i>Bifidobacterium</i>	Natural	Infant gut colonization, immune development
Yogurt	<i>Lactobacillus</i> , <i>Streptococcus</i>	Natural/commercial	Gut health, lactose digestion
Kefir	Lactic acid bacteria+Yeasts	Natural	Antimicrobial, immune modulation
Sauerkraut & Kimchi	<i>Leuconostoc</i> , <i>Lactobacillus</i>	Natural	Digestive health, antioxidant effects
Miso & Tempeh	<i>Bacillus subtilis</i> (Tempeh)	Natural	Protein-rich, gut health
Pickles (fermented)	Various LAB	Natural	Digestive support, microbiome balance
Supplements	<i>Lactobacillus</i> , <i>Bifidobacterium</i> , etc.	Commercial	Specific strain-targeted effects
Fortified foods/beverages	Strain-specific probiotics	Functional food	Custom-formulated for health outcomes

U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the European Food Safety Authority, based on long-standing human consumption and rigorous toxicological assessments^{10–11} (Table 1). This designation underscores their reliability for general use, although careful strain-specific evaluations remain important, particularly for vulnerable populations such as infants, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals.

The relevance of probiotics lies primarily in their role in supporting balanced intestinal microbiota. A well-regulated microbial community within the gut contributes to efficient digestion, nutrient absorption, and resistance to pathogenic invasion. Moreover, emerging evidence highlights that probiotics exert systemic benefits beyond the gastrointestinal tract, influencing metabolic health, immune system regulation, and even neurobehavioral outcomes through the gut–brain axis^{12–13}. Regular consumption of probiotic-rich foods or supplements, therefore, promotes not only digestive health but also broader physiological stability, positioning probiotics as key agents in preventive nutrition and integrative medicine.

Mechanisms of action and benefits

Probiotics exert their health-promoting effects through multiple, interrelated mechanisms that act at

the molecular, cellular, and systemic levels^{14–18}. These mechanisms not only influence gastrointestinal stability (Table 2) but also extend to metabolic, immunological, and neurological function^{19–26}. The major pathways include the following:

Pathogen inhibition: One of the primary roles of probiotics is their antagonistic activity against pathogenic microorganisms. Probiotic strains compete with pathogens for essential nutrients and adhesion sites along the intestinal epithelium, thereby limiting pathogen colonization and biofilm formation²⁷. In addition, many strains secrete antimicrobial substances such as organic acids (lactic and acetic acids), hydrogen peroxide, and bacteriocins, which lower gut pH and create an unfavorable environment for harmful microbes²⁸. By disrupting the ecological niches of pathogens like *Clostridium difficile*, *Escherichia coli*, and *Salmonella*, probiotics contribute to infection prevention and restoration of microbiota balance following antibiotic treatment.

Immune modulation: Probiotics interact closely with the host's immune system, influencing both innate and adaptive responses. They can enhance macrophage activity, stimulate natural killer (NK) cells, and regulate dendritic cell signaling, which collectively improve the body's ability to detect and eliminate harmful agents. On the adaptive

Table 2 Mechanism of action and related health outcomes of probiotics use

Mechanism	Health Benefit	Examples	References
Microbial balance restoration	Management of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), antibiotic-associated diarrhea, restoration of balance disrupted by diet, stress, or antibiotics	<i>L. rhamnosus</i> GG	19
Pathogen inhibition	Effectively competes with pathogens for nutrients/space and adhesion sites	<i>L. plantarum</i> vs. <i>E. coli</i>	20
Gut barrier enhancement	Prevents translocation of pathogens, digestive health	<i>L. casei</i> CRL 431	19
Immunomodulation	Increased antibody e.g. cytokine production (IL-6, IL-10), immune cells activation, balanced immune system	<i>L. paracasei</i> CNCM I-1518	21, 22
Modulation of gut-brain axis	Reduction in anxiety, stress and depression, influences mental health well being	Multistrain probiotics in trials	23
Lactose digestion enhancement	Lactose intolerance relief, nutrient adsorption, possible weight management, metabolic health	<i>L. acidophilus</i> LBKV-3	24
Inflammatory response regulation	Reduced allergic reactions, acne, eczema, overall skin health	Fermented milk blends	25
Phagocytic activity stimulation	Boosted innate immune response	<i>B. lactis</i> HN019	26

side, probiotics influence the production of immunoglobulin A (IgA) and modulate cytokine profiles by promoting anti-inflammatory cytokines (e.g., IL-10) while reducing pro-inflammatory mediators (e.g., TNF- α , IL-6). Furthermore, certain strains enhance the function of regulatory T-cells (Tregs), maintaining immune tolerance and preventing overactive immune responses that contribute to allergies and autoimmune disorders²⁹⁻³¹.

Gut barrier reinforcement: The intestinal epithelial barrier is crucial for preventing the translocation of toxins, allergens, and pathogenic microbes into systemic circulation. Some probiotic strains strengthen this barrier by upregulating tight junction proteins such as occludin and claudin, thereby reducing intestinal permeability ("leaky gut"). This fortification minimizes local inflammation and systemic endotoxemia, which are linked to chronic conditions like inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and metabolic syndrome. Additionally, probiotics can stimulate mucus production and enhance the secretion of antimicrobial peptides from epithelial cells, further fortifying host defenses³²⁻³³.

Metabolic and neurological effects: Beyond local gut effects, probiotics influence host metabolism and neurobiology. They contribute to lipid metabolism

by modulating bile salt hydrolase activity, which affects cholesterol reabsorption, and they enhance glucose regulation by improving insulin sensitivity and influencing short-chain fatty acid (SCFA) production, especially butyrate. SCFAs also serve as signaling molecules that regulate energy balance and inflammation³⁴. Importantly, probiotics communicate with the central nervous system via the gut-brain axis. Through mechanisms involving vagus nerve signaling, modulation of neurotransmitters (e.g., serotonin, GABA), and regulation of systemic inflammation, certain strains have shown potential in alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline³⁵⁻³⁶. These findings open new frontiers in psychobiotics (probiotics specifically studied for mental health benefits).

It is important to emphasize that these effects are strain-specific, meaning that not all probiotics exhibit the same biological actions. Outcomes also vary widely across individuals depending on host genetics, age, diet, lifestyle, and the baseline composition of the gut microbiome. This variability underscores the importance of precision in probiotic research and the need for personalized approaches to maximize health benefits.

Probiotics and human well-being

The beneficial effects of probiotics extend far beyond the gastrointestinal tract, influencing diverse aspects of human health. Their contributions are increasingly supported by experimental evidence, clinical trials, and meta-analyses, though many of these outcomes are strain-specific and context-dependent. The following domains highlight areas where probiotics have demonstrated relevance for human well-being.

Gastrointestinal health: Probiotics are most strongly associated with gastrointestinal (GI) health, where their efficacy is well documented in both prevention and treatment. Clinical evidence supports their role in reducing the incidence and severity of antibiotic-associated diarrhea (AAD), as well as in managing irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and IBD, including Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. For instance, *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG has demonstrated effectiveness in lowering the risk of *Clostridium difficile*-associated diarrhea, a serious complication of antibiotic therapy³⁷. Probiotics can also help restore microbiota balance following antibiotic disruption, reduce bloating and abdominal discomfort in IBS patients, and modulate inflammatory pathways implicated in chronic bowel disorders.

Metabolic disorders: Beyond digestive health, probiotics influence metabolic processes linked to obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases³⁸⁻³⁹. Research indicates that probiotics may improve insulin sensitivity, modulate glucose metabolism, and positively affect lipid profiles by lowering serum cholesterol and triglyceride levels⁴⁰. These benefits are often mediated through short-chain fatty acid (SCFA) production, bile salt metabolism, and reduced systemic inflammation. However, the findings remain heterogeneous across clinical trials, with several meta-analyses pointing to strain-specific efficacy rather than universal benefits across all probiotics⁴¹. This suggests that targeted use of specific strains, rather than broad

supplementation, may be necessary to optimize metabolic outcomes.

Lactose intolerance: Another well-established area of probiotic benefit lies in the management of lactose intolerance. Strains such as *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium longum* improve lactose digestion by producing β -galactosidase (lactase) enzymes or by enhancing residual lactase activity in the gut⁴²⁻⁴⁵. This enzymatic activity reduces gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating, cramping, and diarrhea after lactose ingestion⁴⁶. The incorporation of probiotic cultures into fermented dairy products, such as yogurt, not only enhances palatability but also provides a natural therapeutic option for individuals with lactose malabsorption.

Allergies and immune responses: Probiotics play an important role in modulating allergic and immune responses. Several studies report that probiotic supplementation can reduce serum immunoglobulin E (IgE) levels, alleviate symptoms of allergic rhinitis, and contribute to the prevention of atopic dermatitis (eczema) in infants^{17,30,31,47-48}. For example, maternal and infant supplementation with certain *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* strains has been associated with a lower incidence of eczema in early childhood⁴⁹. Nevertheless, outcomes vary widely depending on the timing of administration, strain selection, and host factors, indicating the need for precision-based approaches in allergy prevention and management.

Mental health and the gut-brain axis: One of the most rapidly emerging areas of probiotic research relates to their influence on mental health via the gut-brain axis. Probiotics, sometimes termed "psychobiotics" when used for this purpose, can modulate neurotransmitter signaling, regulate systemic inflammation, and influence the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Studies suggest that certain strains may reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve stress resilience, and enhance aspects of cognitive performance³⁵⁻³⁶. Proposed mechanisms

include increased production of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), serotonin modulation, and vagus nerve activation. While early findings are promising, the evidence base is still developing, and larger, more robust clinical trials are required to establish causality and long-term safety.

Other emerging areas: In addition to the above, research is beginning to explore the role of probiotics in oral health (e.g., reducing dental caries and periodontal disease), dermatological conditions such as acne and psoriasis, and even cancer prevention through modulation of gut microbiota and immune pathways. These emerging applications reflect the expanding recognition of probiotics as multifunctional agents that contribute to systemic well-being beyond traditional gastrointestinal contexts.

Side effects associated with probiotics

Probiotics are largely regarded as being safe for a healthy population. However, individuals with underlying medical conditions, including systemic infections, deleterious metabolic activities, excessive immune stimulation, and gene transfer, are highly sensitive to the intake of probiotics. The interactions that occur between the microbes in the intestine impact and influence the overall health condition of the host. Adverse effects due to the consumption of probiotics have been well reported. Thus, a good understanding of the characteristics of the relationships between probiotic structure and function would help reduce any possible side effects. Hence, it is imperative to have a full understanding of the mechanisms of activity of probiotic bacteria. Some of the risks associated with the unrestricted dietary intake of probiotics include: Probiotic sepsis, allergic rhinitis and more serious asthma, wheezing bronchitis, intra-abdominal abscess, and atopic sensitization, among others⁵⁰⁻⁵¹.

Probiotics as consumer products: opportunities and challenges

There are significant opportunities for the market growth of probiotics due to rising health awareness

and demand for functional foods⁵²⁻⁵⁵. Understanding the lifecycle of probiotics as consumer products is essential for evaluating their broader implications for food safety, public health, and environmental sustainability. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the key stages in the development, utilization, and post-consumption fate of probiotics. Each phase is interconnected, with critical feedback mechanisms that inform future product innovation, sustainability practices, and policy frameworks. This systems-oriented progression perspective highlights the relevance of circular economy principles in optimizing the lifecycle of probiotics for safer, more sustainable, and health-promoting applications across human and environmental domains.

Challenges and limitations

While the benefits of probiotics are widely documented, challenges in their use include:

Strain-specific efficacy: Not all strains within a genus exert health effects, and outcomes cannot be generalized²⁹.

Viability and stability: Many probiotics do not survive gastric acidity or bile salts, limiting their efficacy⁷.

Safety concerns: In immunocompromised individuals, probiotics can, on rare occasions, cause infections or transfer antibiotic resistance genes.

Variability in host response: Age, microbiota composition, and diet influence outcomes, complicating clinical standardization.

Other significant barriers to market entry, especially in low- and middle-income countries, include:

Regulatory frameworks: Regulatory oversight varies significantly across regions, reflecting the diversity of standards applied to these products⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸. In the EU, probiotics are regulated as “novel foods” and must demonstrate safety and efficacy before approval, while in the U.S., they are often marketed as dietary supplements with less stringent pre-market requirements⁵⁹. In addition, limited resources and capacity for regulatory oversight

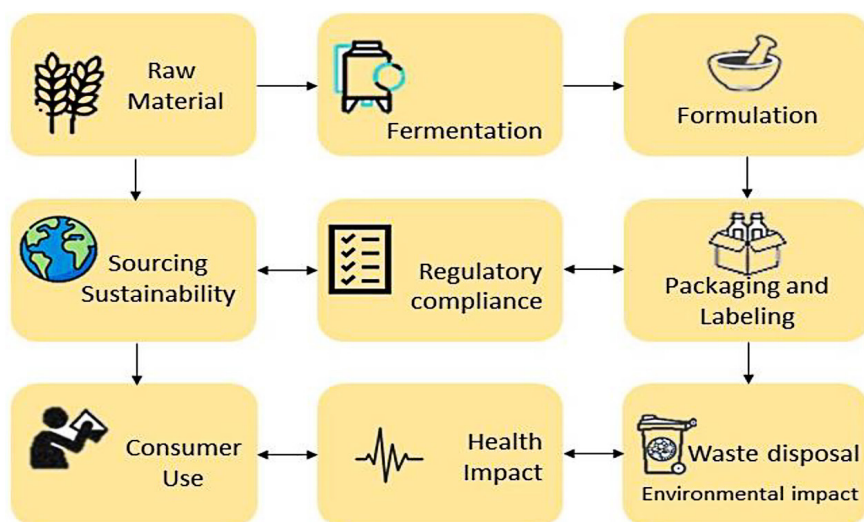


Figure 1 Lifecycle of probiotic products from raw materials to environmental impact

and enforcement across countries hinder the effective regulation of probiotics⁵². Standardizing these regulations has the potential to enhance product quality, which is critical to ensure efficacy and consumer trust.

Labelling: Accurate labeling provides essential information to consumers, supporting informed choices and safe use^{60–61}. The labelling of probiotics is essential for ensuring consumer awareness and safety. Key requirements across different countries include details such as the genus, species, strain, and Colony-Forming Units (CFUs) at the product's shelf-life endpoint. Also, health claims must be accompanied by a disclaimer⁶², strain-specific quantities, and storage conditions⁶³. The regulation and labelling of probiotics have far-reaching implications for food safety, public health, and environmental health (Table 3). As probiotics become more prevalent in the markets, understanding these implications is crucial for policymakers, manufacturers, and consumers.

Probiotics at the node of food safety, public health, and environmental sustainability

Probiotics occupy a pivotal role at the intersection

of food safety, human well-being, public health, and environmental sustainability. As illustrated in Figure 2, probiotics are not merely functional food components; they also serve as integrative agents linking microbiological safety, nutritional quality, health promotion, and ecological impact. Their production, regulation, and use are influenced by factors such as food system hygiene, disease prevention, gut microbiome balance, and waste management practices.

Food safety

Live microorganisms require strict safety monitoring to prevent contamination and ensure product consistency^{64–66}. Mislabeling or adulteration can lead to ineffective or harmful products, especially in low- and middle-income countries with weak regulatory oversight^{67–68}. A Robust regulatory framework is essential for consumer protection, informed use, and accessibility^{64–66,69}.

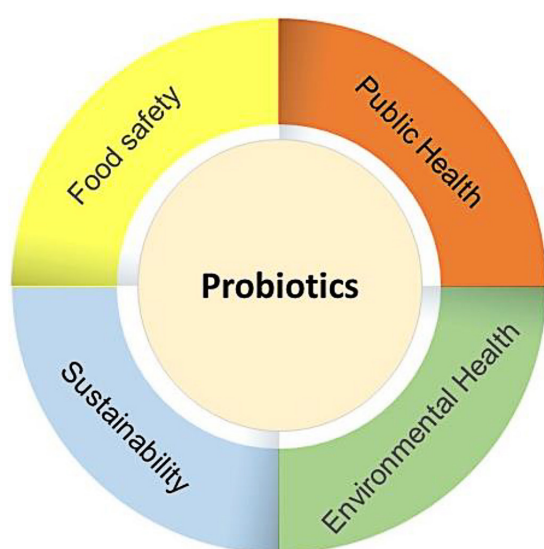
Public health

Probiotics hold promise for reducing global health burdens such as diarrheal diseases, antibiotic resistance, and noncommunicable diseases. Safe production, inclusion

Table 3 Regulatory requirements for probiotics and implications for safety and health

Aspect	Description/requirements	Implication
Regulatory oversight	Varies globally; weak in LMICs	Leads to market infiltration of substandard products
Labeling requirements	Genus, species, strain, CFU, shelf life, health claims	Informs consumer choice, builds trust
Health claims	Must be evidence-based in regulated countries	Prevents misinformation
Risk communication	Storage conditions, dosage, contraindications	Enhances safe use
Environmental standards	Waste management, biodegradability of packaging	Reduces environmental burden

LMICs=low middle-income countries, CFUs=colony-forming units

**Figure 2** Circular One-Health framework of probiotics, its use and impacts

of verified benefits, and clear labeling, backed by regulation, all positively impact public health^{57,64–66}. Furthermore, sound scientific evidence is required to support health claims, ensuring consumers receive accurate information and limiting exaggerated health promotion and marketing claims^{57,64}.

Environmental health and sustainability: The lifecycle of probiotics—from production to disposal—can impact ecosystems. The environmental footprint

encompasses raw material use, energy demand, and waste disposal. Encouraging sustainable practices, such as eco-friendly fermentation, energy-efficient production processes, and proper waste management, can reduce the risks of microbial contamination or antimicrobial resistance spread in ecosystems and contribute to overall environmental health^{65–66,70–71}. Regulations should promote sustainable practices, especially proper disposal of expired or contaminated probiotics, to reduce environmental contamination, antimicrobial resistance, and ecosystem disruption^{57,65,72–73}.

Conclusion

Probiotics represent a broad-spectrum tool for enhancing human health, with applications that extend far beyond traditional gastrointestinal benefits. Their roles in maintaining digestive balance, supporting metabolic regulation, mitigating allergic responses, and even influencing mental well-being through the gut-brain axis underscore their potential as integral components of preventive and therapeutic healthcare. By contributing to immune modulation, reinforcing the intestinal barrier, and promoting microbial diversity, probiotics serve as important allies in both clinical practice and everyday nutrition.

However, several critical challenges remain unresolved. Inconsistent global regulations make it difficult to standardize claims, labeling, and safety requirements,

thereby limiting consumer trust and clinical adoption. Strain-specific variability also complicates both research and practice, as benefits cannot be generalized across all probiotics, necessitating precise identification and targeted application. Additionally, issues surrounding the sustainability of large-scale probiotic production and the ecological implications of their use are emerging concerns that warrant greater attention.

Looking ahead, advances in microbiome science, next-generation sequencing, and bioengineering offer promising opportunities to refine probiotic development and delivery. The future of probiotics may lie in personalized approaches, where formulations are tailored to individual genetic, dietary, and microbiome profiles, thereby maximizing efficacy and minimizing risks. For probiotics to realize their full potential as a cornerstone of modern health strategies, these scientific, regulatory, and sustainability challenges must be systematically addressed through rigorous research, policy harmonization, and innovation in product design.

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