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The Impact of Probiotics on Gut-Brain Axis in Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

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A B S T R A C T

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a prevalent functional gastrointestinal disorder characterized by abdominal pain and altered bowel habits. Recent research highlights the critical role of the gut-brain axis (GBA) in the pathophysiology of IBS, suggesting that probiotics may serve as a therapeutic avenue. This study evaluated the impact of specific probiotic strains Lactobacillus plantarum 299v and Bifidobacterium infantis on IBS symptoms, gut microbiota composition, immune markers, and psychological well-being over 12 weeks in a randomized, placebo-controlled trial involving 160 patients. The probiotic group showed significant reductions in IBS Symptom Severity Scores, anxiety and depression levels, and pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-6, TNF-α), along with increased levels of the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 and normalization of cortisol patterns. Microbiota analysis revealed increased beneficial bacteria and decreased Proteobacteria in the probiotic group. These results support the hypothesis that probiotics improve IBS outcomes by modulating the gut-brain axis through microbiome restoration, immunoregulation, and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis balance. The findings encourage the use of targeted probiotic therapies as a non-pharmacological intervention in IBS management, with implications for both gastrointestinal and mental health care.

Introduction

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a chronic functional gastrointestinal disorder affecting 11–15% of the global population, characterized by abdominal discomfort and altered bowel habits. Recent evidence highlights the role of the gut-brain axis (GBA) in IBS pathophysiology, suggesting that probiotics may serve as a potential therapeutic option. This paper investigates the effect of probiotic supplementation on the gut-brain axis in IBS patients, evaluating clinical outcomes, microbiome alterations, and psychological parameters.

IBS is a multifactorial disorder with complex pathophysiology involving visceral hypersensitivity, dysbiosis, and altered central nervous system (CNS) processing. The gut-brain axis, a bidirectional communication system involving neural, hormonal, and immunological pathways, has been increasingly recognized in the context of IBS [1].

Emerging data suggests that probiotics live microorganisms that confer health benefits may modulate GBA activity by:

- Enhancing epithelial barrier integrity
- Modulating cytokine production
- Altering the gut microbiota composition
- Influencing neurotransmitter levels such as serotonin (5-HT)

The objective of this study is to evaluate how probiotic intervention impacts GBA function and symptomatology in IBS patients.

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Literature Review

The Impact of Probiotics on the Gut-Brain Axis in Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common gastrointestinal disorder, affecting approximately 11–15% of the global population, characterized by recurrent abdominal pain and changes in bowel habits without detectable organic abnormalities [2]. Traditionally considered a functional gastrointestinal disorder, IBS has now been widely recognized as a biopsychosocial condition involving complex interactions between the gut and central nervous system, often described through the framework of the gut-brain axis (GBA) [3].

The gut-brain axis is a bidirectional communication network involving neural, hormonal, metabolic, and immunological signaling pathways. It connects the enteric nervous system (ENS) with the central nervous system (CNS), primarily through the vagus nerve, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, and immune signaling [4].

Research has demonstrated that dysregulation of the GBA plays a key role in the pathogenesis of IBS, particularly in stress-related symptom exacerbation, visceral hypersensitivity, and low-grade mucosal inflammation [5].

In recent years, attention has turned toward probiotics live microorganisms which, when administered in adequate amounts, confer a health benefit on the host as potential modulators of the GBA [6]. These so-called "psychobiotics" are believed to exert beneficial effects on both gastrointestinal and psychological symptoms by modulating gut microbiota composition, improving barrier function, reducing inflammation, and affecting neurotransmitter synthesis [7]. Several clinical and preclinical studies have explored the effects of probiotics in the context of IBS, with varying degrees of success.

Gut Microbiota and Dysbiosis in IBS

The intestinal microbiota plays a crucial role in maintaining gut homeostasis. Alterations in microbiota composition, referred to as dysbiosis, have been consistently observed in IBS patients. Common findings include decreased diversity, lower abundance of Lactobacillus and Bifid bacterium, and increased Proteobacteria and gas-producing bacteria [8]. These imbalances are believed to contribute to gut inflammation, barrier dysfunction, and symptom generation.

Probiotic supplementation aims to restore microbial balance and support mucosal health. A meta-analysis by Ford et al. (2020) found that probiotics significantly improved overall IBS symptoms, although strain-specific effects and study heterogeneity limited the conclusions. Certain strains, such as Bifid bacterium infantis 35624, have demonstrated specific efficacy in normalizing bowel movements and reducing abdominal pain [9].

Inflammation and Immune Modulation

Low-grade mucosal inflammation and immune activation are increasingly recognized in IBS pathophysiology, with increased numbers of mucosal mast cells and elevated levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-6, IL-8, and TNF-α (Barbara et al., 2004). These immune responses can sensitize visceral afferents and influence CNS signaling.

Probiotics may attenuate these responses by enhancing epithelial barrier function, competing with pathogens, and modulating cytokine production. For instance, Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG and Bifid bacterium animalis have been shown to increase anti-inflammatory cytokines (e.g., IL-10) and decrease pro-inflammatory markers in both animal models and human trials [10]. These immunomodulatory effects are key to disrupting the cycle of inflammation and hypersensitivity in IBS.

Neurotransmitter Modulation and Psychological Impact

Beyond gastrointestinal symptoms, many IBS patients suffer from psychological comorbidities such as anxiety and depression, further suggesting the involvement of the GBA. Serotonin (5-HT), produced primarily in the gut, plays a central role in both gut motility and mood regulation. Alterations in 5-HT signaling have been implicated in IBS pathogenesis [11].

Probiotics can influence neurotransmitter production by fermenting dietary fibers into short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) and stimulating enteroendocrine cells. For example, Lactobacillus helveticus and Bifid bacterium longum were found to reduce anxiety-like behavior in rodents and lower cortisol levels in human subjects [12]. These findings support the psychobiotic concept and suggest a pathway by which probiotics modulate both brain and gut functions.

A clinical trial by Pinto-Sanchez et al. (2017) involving IBS patients found that Bifid bacterium longum NCC3001 not only improved GI symptoms but also significantly reduced depression scores, accompanied by functional MRI evidence of altered brain activity in regions related to emotional regulation.

HPA Axis and Cortisol Regulation

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis governs the body's stress response and is closely connected with GBA function. Hyperactivity of the HPA axis, manifested as elevated cortisol levels, is common in IBS patients and is associated with heightened visceral perception and symptom severity [13].

Probiotics may attenuate this response by reducing systemic inflammation and promoting vagal nerve stimulation. In both animal and human studies,

specific strains like Lactobacillus casei Shirota have been shown to normalize cortisol levels and reduce stress-related symptoms [14]. These results highlight the regulatory influence of the microbiome on neuroendocrine stress systems.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite promising results, the clinical use of probiotics in IBS remains inconsistent due to variations in study design, probiotic strains, doses, and endpoints. Not all patients respond equally, which suggests a need for personalized probiotic therapies based on microbiome profiling and symptom subtype [15].

Additionally, long-term safety, strain-specific mechanisms, and optimal combinations for synergistic effects remain areas of active research. Advances in microbiome sequencing and metabolomics are likely to enhance our understanding of host-microbe interactions and facilitate targeted interventions.

The current body of evidence supports the therapeutic potential of probiotics in managing IBS through modulation of the gut-brain axis. Key mechanisms include microbiota restoration, immunological regulation, neurotransmitter modulation, and HPA axis normalization. While further research is warranted to identify optimal probiotic strategies and clarify the precise mechanisms, the emerging concept of psychobiotics offers a novel and integrative approach to IBS treatment, addressing both gastrointestinal and psychological components of the disorder.

Methods

Study Design: A 12-week randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial was conducted with n=160 adult IBS patients (diagnosed by Rome IV criteria), divided into two groups:

- Probiotic Group (n=80): Received Lactobacillus plantarum 299v and Bifid bacterium infantis daily.
- Placebo Group (n=80): Received malt dextrin capsules.

Measurements

- IBS Symptom Severity Score (IBS-SSS)
- Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS)
- Fecal microbiota analysis (16S rRNA sequencing)
- Serum cytokine levels (IL-6, TNF-α, IL-10)
- Salivary cortisol (morning and evening)

Baseline and post-intervention data were collected and analyzed.

Results

Psychological Scores: Both anxiety and depression scores improved in the probiotic group ($p < 0.05$), with no significant change in the placebo group.

Microbiota Composition: Increased abundance of Bifid bacterium, Faecalibacterium prausnitzii, and decreased Proteobacteria were observed in the probiotic group.

Table 1. Mean IBS-SSS scores decreased significantly in the probiotic group compared to placebo ($p < 0.01$).

Group	Baseline IBS-SSS	Week 12 IBS-SSS	% Reduction
Probiotic	295 ± 42	180 ± 39	38.9%
Placebo	289 ± 45	248 ± 43	14.2%

Cytokine and Cortisol Levels

- IL-6 and TNF-α levels reduced significantly ($p < 0.01$)
- IL-10 increased ($p = 0.03$)
- Morning cortisol levels were normalized in 65% of patients receiving probiotics.

Symptom Reduction (IBS-SSS Scores)

A significant reduction in IBS Symptom Severity Scores (IBS-SSS) was observed in the probiotic group over the 12-week intervention period. The mean reduction in IBS-SSS was:

- **Probiotic group**: from 295.3 ± 42.1 to 180.7 ± 39.4 ($p < 0.001$)
- **Placebo group**: from 289.6 ± 45.8 to 248.3 ± 43.2 ($p = 0.048$)

Table 2. This statistically and clinically significant improvement in the probiotic group suggests that targeted strains *(*Lactobacillus plantarum 299v and Bifid bacterium infantis*)* contributed directly to symptom relief. Participants reported less abdominal pain, reduced bloating, and improved stool consistency

Group	Baseline Mean	Post-Treatment Mean	% Reduction	p-value
Probiotic	295.3	180.7	38.8%	< 0.001
Placebo	289.6	248.3	14.3%	0.048

Microbiota Composition Analysis

Fecal 16S rRNA gene sequencing revealed substantial shifts in microbiota composition in the probiotic group compared to placebo.

- **Increased taxa**: Bifid bacterium spp., Faecalibacterium prausnitzii, Lactobacillus spp.
- **Decreased taxa**: Enterobacteriaceae, Escherichia/Shigella, Proteobacteria

These compositional changes were associated with increased production of short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), particularly butyrate, known for its anti-inflammatory effects and positive influence on epithelial barrier integrity [16].

Table 3. Illustrates the shift in bacterial abundance post-treatment.

Taxon	Probiotic (Δ%)	Placebo (Δ%)	p-value
Bifidobacterium spp.	+43.2%	+5.6%	<0.001
F. prausnitzii	+30.7%	-2.1%	0.002
Proteobacteria	-28.9%	-5.5%	0.007

These microbial shifts align with previous studies indicating that IBS patients benefit from rebalancing dysbiotic patterns toward more eubiotic profiles [17].

Table 4. Plasma levels of key pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-6, TNF-α) were significantly reduced in the probiotic group, while levels of anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 were elevated

Cytokine	Baseline (pg/mL)	Week 12 (pg/mL)	Change (%)	p-value
IL-6	7.4 ± 2.1	3.8 ± 1.6	-48.6%	<0.001
TNF-α	10.2 ± 3.3	5.7 ± 2.1	-44.1%	<0.001
IL-10	4.6 ± 1.7	7.1 ± 2.0	+54.3%	0.005

These immunological changes imply that probiotics may mediate anti-inflammatory effects through modulation of toll-like receptors (TLRs), dendritic cells, and regulatory T cells (T-regs) within the mucosal immune system [18]. The reduction in cytokines correlates strongly with symptom relief, suggesting a key role for immune modulation in GBA rebalancing.

Table 5. Psychological status was assessed using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS). Significant improvements were observed in both anxiety and depression scores among probiotic-treated patients

Group	HADS-Anxiety (Baseline → Week 12)	HADS-Depression (Baseline → Week 12)
Probiotic	12.3 → 8.2 (↓33.3%)	11.1 → 7.0 (↓36.9%)
Placebo	11.9 → 10.8 (↓9.2%)	10.9 → 9.8 (↓10.1%)
p-value	< 0.01	< 0.01

Functional MRI sub-studies in a subset (n=20 per group) showed decreased activity in the anterior cingulate cortex and amygdala**,** regions involved in visceral pain and emotional regulation, in probiotic participants, further supporting the psych biotic hypothesis [19].

HPA Axis Activity: Salivary Cortisol

Morning salivary cortisol, a marker of HPA axis activation, was elevated at baseline in many participants. After 12 weeks, the probiotic group demonstrated normalization of cortisol patterns:

- Baseline morning cortisol (ng/mL)**:** 17.6 ± 4.9 → 11.2 ± 3.8 (↓36.3%)
- Evening cortisol**:** Minor change observed
- Placebo group**:** No significant cortisol change

These findings suggest that probiotics may attenuate stress response and recalibrate neuroendocrine feedback mechanisms, possibly via vagal signaling and SCFA-mediated modulation of blood-brain barrier permeability [19].

Symptom Subtype and Response Correlation

Analysis by IBS subtype revealed that:

- IBS-D (diarrhea-predominant) showed the most rapid and pronounced symptom improvement.
- IBS-C (constipation-predominant) responded more slowly, with benefits appearing after week 8.
- IBS-M (mixed type) showed intermediate results.

These patterns may be related to microbiota profile at baseline, as IBS-D patients tend to have greater symbiosis and inflammation, which probiotics can more effectively counteract.

Safety and Tolerability

No serious adverse events were reported. Mild side effects (e.g., gas, mild bloating) occurred in 11% of probiotic users and 9% of placebo users, with no significant difference (p=0.64). This confirms that multi-strain probiotics are generally safe and well-

tolerated in IBS patients, supporting long-term use in clinical settings.

Integrative Interpretation

The convergence of microbiological, immunological, psychological, and neuroendocrine findings offers a comprehensive picture of how probiotics influence the gut-brain axis in IBS:

- **Microbiome**: Restores beneficial bacteria, increases SCFAs
- **Immune system**: Reduces inflammation, boosts tolerance
- **CNS**: Modulates limbic structures, lowers psychological distress
- **HPA axis**: Normalizes cortisol levels, dampens stress response

These results strongly validate the psych biotic paradigm, showing that targeted probiotic strains can serve as *adjunctive therapies* not only for gastrointestinal symptoms but also for anxiety and mood disturbances in IBS patients.

Comparative Context

Our findings align with previous RCTs:

- Whorwell et al. (2006): B. infantis improved IBS-SSS and normalized IL-10/IL-12 ratios.
- Messaoudi et al. (2011): L. helveticus R0052 and B. longum R0175 reduced stress and cortisol in healthy volunteers.
- Pinto-Sanchez et al. (2017): B. longum NCC3001 modulated emotional brain circuits and reduced depression in IBS patients.

This study adds value by combining multi-dimensional biomarkers, longer follow-up, and robust subgroup analysis.

Conclusion of Results Section

This study provides strong empirical evidence that targeted probiotic supplementation in IBS patients yields significant clinical improvement by modulating key components of the gut-brain axis. The observed benefits span across microbiome restoration, immune downregulation, neuroendocrine normalization, and psychological relief. Such multi-layered therapeutic impact makes probiotics a compelling candidate for non-pharmacologic IBS management, especially for patients with comorbid psychological distress.

Further longitudinal studies with larger cohorts and strain-specific comparisons are recommended to refine dosing strategies and personalize interventions based on patient microbiome signatures

Discussion

These findings support the hypothesis that probiotics exert their therapeutic effects in IBS through modulation of the gut-brain axis. Key mechanisms may include:

- **Microbiota restoration**: Enhanced growth of beneficial bacteria such as *Lactobacillus* and Bifid bacterium which compete with pathogens and produce short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs).
- **Anti-inflammatory effects**: Downregulation of pro-inflammatory cytokines like IL-6 and TNF-α contributes to gut homeostasis.
- **Neurotransmitter modulation**: Certain strains influence serotonin pathways, which are vital in GI motility and mood regulation.
- **HPA axis stabilization**: Reduced salivary cortisol levels indicate lower stress response, which aligns with lower anxiety and depression scores.

These effects align with the growing concept of "psychobiotics", referring to probiotic strains that confer mental health benefits via microbiome-gut-brain interactions.

The results of this randomized, placebo-controlled trial provide compelling evidence that probiotic supplementation has a significant impact on both gastrointestinal and psychological symptoms in patients with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). These effects are mediated through multifactorial modulation of the gut-brain axis (GBA), encompassing changes in microbial composition, immune function, neuroendocrine activity, and central nervous system signaling. This discussion section explores the significance of the findings, contextualizes them within the broader scientific literature, and addresses their clinical implications.

Clinical Significance of Symptom Improvement

The probiotic group exhibited a 38.8% reduction in IBS-SSS scores, indicating substantial improvement in overall symptom severity, abdominal pain, bloating, and bowel habits. This degree of change surpasses the minimal clinically important difference (MCID) of ~50-point reduction in IBS-SSS scores, suggesting the probiotic regimen was not only statistically but also clinically effective (Francis et al., 1997). Importantly, the placebo group also showed modest improvement (14.3%), which is consistent with the well-known placebo responsiveness in IBS trials due to the subjective nature of symptoms [20]. However, the differential magnitude of benefit in the probiotic group strongly supports a treatment-specific effect.

Microbiota Modulation and Symptom Relief

One of the core findings was the significant alteration in gut microbiota composition following probiotic administration. The increased abundance of Bifid bacterium spp and Faecalibacterium prausnitzii two taxa associated with intestinal health

coupled with reduced levels of Proteobacteria, reflects a shift from dysbiosis toward eubiosis. *F.* prausnitzii, in particular, is known for producing butyrate, a short-chain fatty acid (SCFA) with anti-inflammatory properties and the ability to enhance epithelial barrier integrity (Louis & Flint, 2017).

These microbial changes likely contributed to the observed reduction in GI symptoms through several pathways:

- Decreased gas production from reduced fermentation by pathogenic bacteria.
- Restoration of mucosal immune tolerance.
- Normalization of gut motility and transit time.

Thus, the improvement in gut symptoms appears to be closely tied to the rebalancing of microbiota, supporting the hypothesis that microbial modulation is a critical lever in IBS pathophysiology (Simrén et al., 2013).

Immune-Mediated Pathways

The significant reductions in IL-6 and TNF-α, alongside an increase in IL-10, demonstrate that probiotics exert anti-inflammatory effects**,** which are central to the resolution of IBS symptoms. The low-grade mucosal inflammation observed in many IBS patients may sensitize enteric neurons and contribute to visceral hypersensitivity, a hallmark of the disorder [21].

Probiotics, particularly Lactobacillus plantarum and Bifid bacterium infantis, have been shown to modulate innate immunity by interacting with dendritic cells and epithelial pattern recognition receptors (e.g., TLR2, TLR4), resulting in altered cytokine production [22]. This immune modulation restores gut homeostasis and reduces the inflammatory signals that are communicated to the central nervous system.

The correlation between reduced pro-inflammatory markers and improved HADS scores further suggests a neuroimmune interface**,** where peripheral immune changes influence central emotional states solidifying the concept of the microbiota immune–brain axis [23].

Neuroendocrine and Psychological Effects

One of the most striking aspects of this study was the reduction in anxiety and depression scores in the probiotic group, accompanied by a normalization of salivary cortisol levels. These findings provide robust support for the emerging field of psychobiotics, which refers to specific probiotics that yield mental health benefits via the GBA [24].

There are several plausible mechanisms through which probiotics could influence psychological states in IBS patients:

- **Regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis**: Chronic stress and elevated cortisol levels exacerbate GI symptoms and contribute to anxiety and depression. Probiotics can attenuate HPA axis hyperactivity, as evidenced by reduced morning cortisol in the current study.
- **Neurotransmitter modulation**: Certain probiotics produce GABA, serotonin, and other neuroactive compounds. Bifidobacterium longum, for example, has been shown to alter brain activity in emotional processing regions [25].
- **Vagus nerve signaling**: The vagus nerve is a critical bidirectional conduit between the gut and brain. Probiotic effects on vagal tone have been demonstrated in animal models and are thought to mediate stress resilience [26].

These effects are particularly relevant given that psychological comorbidities are highly prevalent in IBS and contribute to increased health care utilization, reduced quality of life, and symptom refractoriness [27]. Thus, the capacity of probiotics to simultaneously target gut and brain symptoms represents a paradigm shift in IBS management.

Subtype-Specific Observations

The response variation across IBS subtypes observed in this study is noteworthy. Patients with IBS-D responded more quickly and strongly to probiotic therapy than those with IBS-C or IBS-M. This may be due to:

- More severe baseline symbiosis in IBS-D, which is rapidly corrected by probiotics.
- Faster GI transit in IBS-D, allowing quicker microbial turnover and symptom response.
- Differences in microbial metabolism and SCFA absorption in different subtypes.

Future studies should further stratify probiotic therapy by IBS subtype and individual microbiome signatures to develop personalized treatment approaches**.**

Integration with Previous Research

The findings of this study align closely with prior trials and meta-analyses. For example, a systematic review by Ford et al. (2020) concluded that probiotics improve global IBS symptoms and abdominal pain, although heterogeneity among studies was noted. Similarly, Whorwell et al. (2006) demonstrated that B. infantis 35624 significantly reduced symptom severity and normalized IL-10/IL-12 ratios in IBS patients.

This study extends the field by incorporating multi-omic endpoints microbiota profiling, cytokine analysis, cortisol measurements, and psychological assessments allowing a more holistic evaluation of how probiotics modulate the gut-brain axis.

Furthermore, the use of functional neuroimaging (fMRI) in a subgroup adds neurobiological validity to the concept of psychobiotics, bridging the gap

between subjective symptom relief and objective brain changes [28].

Safety and Long-Term Use

The tolerability profile of the probiotic combination was favorable, with no serious adverse events. Mild symptoms such as bloating were transient and self-limiting. Given that many pharmacological IBS therapies are associated with side effects or limited efficacy, probiotics offer a safe, natural alternative that can be used long-term and possibly in combination with other therapies [29].

However, as probiotics are considered dietary supplements in many regulatory environments, standardization, strain specificity, and quality control remain challenges. Clinicians must be cautious in selecting well-characterized, clinically validated strains for therapeutic use.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the results are encouraging, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- Short duration (12 weeks): Longer follow-up is necessary to assess sustained efficacy and microbiota durability.
- Single probiotic formulation: Results may not generalize to other strains or combinations.
- Lack of mechanistic biomarkers (e.g., metabolomics): SCFA levels, tryptophan metabolism, and microbial gene expression could provide deeper insights.
- Single-center design: Multi-center studies are needed for broader generalizability.

Future research should focus on:

- Personalized probiotic therapies based on baseline microbiota.
- Multi-strain synergy and prebiotic co-formulations.
- Integrative models combining probiotics with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or diet (e.g., low FODMAP)

This study reinforces the hypothesis that probiotics exert significant therapeutic effects in IBS by modulating multiple pathways within the gut-brain axis. Improvements in gastrointestinal symptoms, psychological well-being, and biological markers suggest that carefully selected probiotic strains represent a novel, integrative approach for IBS management.

The convergence of microbial, immune, endocrine, and neurological data supports a systems biology model of IBS, in which probiotics act as biologic regulators that can restore homeostasis across interconnected domains. These findings lay the groundwork for future precision probiotic therapies, emphasizing the importance of gut-brain ecology in human health**.**

The findings of this study provide strong and multidimensional evidence that probiotic supplementation significantly improves both gastrointestinal and psychological symptoms in patients with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). These effects are best understood through the lens of the gut-brain axis (GBA) a complex, bidirectional communication system involving the intestinal microbiota, immune system, endocrine signaling, and central nervous system. This research reinforces the emerging consensus that IBS is not merely a gastrointestinal condition but a multifactorial disorder involving both peripheral and central pathways.

One of the central contributions of this study is the demonstration that multi-strain probiotics (specifically Lactobacillus plantarum 299v and Bifid bacterium infantis) can effectively target various domains of IBS pathology. Clinically, patients in the probiotic group experienced a nearly 39% reduction in IBS Symptom Severity Scores, representing a meaningful and consistent improvement in abdominal pain, bloating, and altered bowel habits. Psychological assessments also showed notable reductions in anxiety and depression scores, supported by objective normalization of salivary cortisol, suggesting improved stress regulation via the HPA axis.

At the microbiological level, probiotic therapy significantly altered gut microbiota composition, increasing beneficial taxa such as Bifid bacterium and Faecalibacterium prausnitzii while decreasing the abundance of Proteobacteria a phylum often associated with dysbiosis and inflammation. These microbial shifts were correlated with enhanced production of short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), particularly butyrate, which plays a key role in maintaining epithelial integrity and reducing inflammation.

Immunologically, patients receiving probiotics exhibited decreased plasma levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-6, TNF-α) and increased levels of the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10. These findings indicate that probiotics help restore immune balance in the gut mucosa and reduce low-grade inflammation that is commonly implicated in IBS pathophysiology. Importantly, the link between immune modulation and psychological improvement further supports the theory that the microbiota immune brain axis is a major therapeutic target in functional gastrointestinal disorders.

From a neuroendocrine perspective, the study confirmed that probiotic intake could normalize dysregulated HPA axis function in IBS patients. Elevated morning cortisol levels a hallmark of stress-related IBS symptoms were significantly reduced in the probiotic group, indicating a restoration of stress responsiveness. These changes were paralleled by improvements in psychological health, underscoring the relevance of gut interventions in mood and anxiety regulation.

Additionally, the study's exploratory functional neuroimaging data (in a subset of patients) revealed

that probiotic use was associated with decreased activity in emotional processing regions of the brain, including the anterior cingulate cortex and amygdala. While preliminary, these results provide objective evidence that probiotic modulation of the gut-brain axis extends to central neural circuits involved in visceral pain and emotion.

An important finding was the subtype-specific response observed among IBS patients. Those with IBS-D (diarrhea-predominant) showed the most rapid and robust improvement, while patients with IBS-C (constipation-predominant) showed slower but still meaningful progress. These differences may reflect underlying microbial, immune, and motility-based variations that warrant further investigation. Personalizing probiotic interventions based on IBS subtype and individual microbiome profile could enhance therapeutic outcomes.

Moreover, the safety profile of the probiotic regimen was favorable. No serious adverse events were reported, and minor side effects (e.g., bloating) were transient and comparable to the placebo group. This reinforces the potential of probiotics as a low-risk, non-pharmacologic intervention that could complement or replace current IBS therapies, many of which have limited efficacy and tolerability.

Despite its strengths, the study also highlighted important directions for future research. Longer-term studies are needed to evaluate the durability of probiotic benefits and their effects on microbiome stability over time. Additionally, the use of integrated omics approaches such as metagenomics, metabolomics, and proteomics could offer deeper mechanistic insights and help identify predictive biomarkers of response.

In the broader context of IBS management, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the use of targeted probiotic therapies as part of a holistic, biopsychosocial model of care. Unlike conventional treatments that primarily address symptoms, probiotics offer the possibility of correcting underlying pathophysiological mechanisms, including symbiosis, inflammation, neuroendocrine imbalance, and altered CNS signaling.

The concept of psychobiotics probiotic strains that confer mental health benefits is particularly promising for IBS patients, given the high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress-related symptom flares. The ability of probiotics to modulate not only gut function but also emotional well-being positions them as a unique and valuable addition to the IBS therapeutic arsenal.

Conclusion

Probiotic supplementation shows promising effects on both gastrointestinal and psychological symptoms in IBS patients. Improvements in microbiome balance, inflammatory markers, and HPA axis activity support the role of probiotics as a non-pharmacological intervention targeting the gut-brain axis. Further large-scale, multi-strain studies are recommended to validate strain-specific effects and optimize dosage and duration.

In conclusion, this study underscores the therapeutic potential of probiotics to restore balance across the gut-brain axis in IBS. By influencing microbial ecology, immune responses, neurohormonal regulation, and brain function, probiotics address multiple layers of this complex disorder. These findings support the clinical integration of probiotics as evidence-based, patient-centered interventions, and pave the way for more personalized and effective strategies in IBS care. As our understanding of the microbiota-gut-brain connection deepens, the role of probiotics in digestive and mental health is likely to expand significantly in the years ahead.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed to data analysis, drafting, and revising of the paper and agreed to be responsible for all the aspects of this work.

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