

## INFORM Hub Annual Event

### Mental Health and Wellbeing Breakout Session Recap

**Date:** 24<sup>th</sup> June 2025

**Venue:** University of Reading, Whiteknights Campus

**Discussion Facilitator:** Dr Shane Gordon (Ulster University) & Professor Phil Burnett (University of Oxford)

---

The session focused on exploring effective communication strategies for probiotics and mental health research, as well as addressing the diverse needs of different demographic groups. The discussion aimed to identify challenges, opportunities, and next steps in promoting evidence-based information and inclusive approaches.

#### Key Discussion Points

- **Communicating the Benefits of Probiotics and Mental Health Research:** The group highlighted the difficulty in conveying the advantages of probiotics for mental health, especially given the prevalence of unregulated social media messages from influencers lacking scientific qualifications. To counteract misinformation, the importance of engaging credible, media-trained academics to deliver clear, engaging, and evidence-based messages was emphasised.

While formal health claims, such as those approved by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), are vital, they may not always be achievable. Therefore, signposting to reputable resources like the *Guide to Probiotic Products Available in the United Kingdom* (INFORM Hub) is crucial for public education.

Distinguishing between animal and human research is essential, with explanations that animal studies support understanding mechanisms but do not directly translate to humans. Using lay summaries and plain-language presentations, especially during Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) events, can help set realistic expectations. Key messages should include that probiotic

benefits are strain-specific, adverse events are possible, and probiotics are not substitutes for standard mental health treatments.

- **Addressing the Needs of Various Demographic Groups:** Understanding and listening to different demographic groups through PPI events is vital for tailoring communication and interventions. Currently, only a minority.

Important groups identified include:

- ❖ **Children and adolescents:** Caution is necessary, especially for infants, immunocompromised children, and formula-fed babies, where prebiotics may be more appropriate than probiotics.
- ❖ **Older adults:** Despite potential declines in gut responsiveness, improving gut health remains beneficial.
- ❖ **Generation Z:** High anxiety levels, particularly during exams, suggest targeted mental health support.
- ❖ **Sex differences:** Since depression is more prevalent in women, gender-specific approaches may be needed.
- ❖ **Socioeconomic factors:** Cost barriers can limit access to high-quality probiotics, highlighting the need for affordable options.

Encouraging the use of prebiotics as a preventative strategy was viewed positively, recognising that individuals with existing mental health issues may seek quick solutions.

## Next Steps

Future actions should involve engaging the public through PPI events to gather insights, co-design communication materials, and develop transparent, balanced messaging. These efforts aim to manage expectations responsibly while emphasising potential benefits and limitations of probiotics in mental health support.