

Bacteria in Our Food: Friend or Foe? (It depends!)

Foods have been fermented by humans for thousands of years. Today, fermenting is a popular way to process our food—it involves using the natural processes of bacteria and yeast to change a food from its original form. Oftentimes in previous generations, fermenting was a way to process food to preserve it from spoiling. There are different fermentation processes. Some methods are



Source: finecooking.com

used to make sauerkraut from cabbage or grape juice to produce wine. This newsletter will give you an overview of fermentation, as well as concerns and benefits of foods made by this process.

Examples of fermented foods

You probably are already eating fermented foods in your diet, even without realizing it! Some fermented foods are heat-treated or made to be shelf-stable and, therefore, do not contain live bacteria. Live bacteria are where benefits from fermented foods are said to be from. Common foods with live

bacteria in them include yogurt, kefir (fermented milk drink), tempeh (fermented soy), raw sauerkraut (fermented cabbage), Kombucha (fermented, sweetened, carbonated tea), raw kimchi (Korean fermented vegetables with different seasonings), and raw apple cider vinegar.

Are fermented foods healthy?

Fermented foods have been around for generations, but recently are experiencing a revival in their popularity, much due to believed health benefits from consuming “good” bacteria. There is mixed research on the benefits of fermented foods. Evidence for benefits is based on studies that have consistently shown improvements associated with one or more type of fermented food in the diet. Benefits include improvement in health status, lower risk of metabolic syndrome, maintenance of a healthier weight, improved blood sugar levels, and addition of healthy bacteria into our gut. Fermenting foods increase the body’s ability to use certain nutrients.



Source: minimalistbaker.com

Do some people need to avoid fermented foods?

There have been studies in the past linking diets that have fermented foods in them with increased risk of throat and stomach cancer. These studies did not consider other parts of life that contribute to cancer risk, such as popularity of smoking in the areas studied, presence of high-fat diets, and lack of fresh vegetables in the diet.

Additionally, fermented foods may be quite high in salt, or sodium. The standard American diet is already abundant in salt (sodium chloride). Practice moderation or choose foods with less sodium.

It's also important when fermenting food at home to be mindful of food safety and proper hygiene.

It is not standard practice to recommend avoiding fermented foods for certain populations. However, if you have a condition where you have a weakened immune system, it is always best to check with your doctor or registered dietitian about whether fermented foods can be added to your diet.

Where can I find fermented foods?

Fermented foods are available at many grocery stores. When looking for fermented foods that have live bacteria in them, read the label for words like “raw”, “fermented”, and “live”. For instance, sauerkraut in a bag on the store's shelf is not providing live and active cultures. However, check out the refrigerated section, often near the dairy or in the produce department. Sometimes you can find raw sauerkraut or raw kimchi there. These foods will contain live bacteria, where most of the believed benefits of fermented foods are found. Remember, a food that is “pickled” is not necessarily fermented.

Some fermented foods are more expensive than others. For instance, kombucha, a fermented tea drink, can oftentimes be pricey. However, Greek yogurt is usually an affordable and easy option to include some protein and live bacteria into your diet!

Need a Dietitian?

Registered Dietitians are here to help you with your nutrition questions. To make an appointment call 412.692.4497 (Oakland location) or 412.623.2421 (Shadyside location).

How do I ferment at home?

There are many resources on the Internet that provide beginners' guides to home fermentation, including equipment needed and step by step processes. Some key tips to remember are as follows:

- Keep vegetables/or other foods being fermented fully submerged in the homemade brine
- Throw away products that get mold on them and look online for ways to troubleshoot handling or preventing this from happening
- Once a food is fully fermented, move it to the refrigerator

You can also use products like a pressure cooker to make your own yogurt at home, if you want to experiment in the kitchen!



Source: modernsteader.com

Bottom Line

Fermented foods are a fun and delicious way to incorporate some healthy bacteria and some new flavors into your diet! Remember to be mindful of sodium content in the foods you add. A low-sodium food generally contains less than 140 mg sodium in a serving. Look for key words on food labels so you know the food you will be eating contains live bacteria. Check with your doctor or registered dietitian if you are having any concerns about adding these foods as a part of a healthy diet. Now, do you think bacteria is a friend or foe in your diet?