

Kefir

- a probiotic boost!

Wholefoods provide us with all the necessary nutrients to maintain good health, and fermented kefir is no exception. This cultured, natural probiotic is tasty and fun to make in the comfort of your own home.



Kefir is a cultured, enzyme-rich food filled with friendly micro-organisms that help balance your inner ecosystem. It is a creamy, drinkable, yoghurt-style fermented milk that tastes something like buttermilk. It is believed that kefir was first developed in the Caucasus Mountains of western Russia

Antibiotics kill off the good bacteria as well as the bad, so it is extremely important to take some form of probiotic if you are using antibiotics.



where shepherds used to carry milk in leather pouches. When the milk was fermented it developed an effervescent taste that was cool and refreshing. It was later discovered that kefir made a great natural medicine that was used to help digestive disorders, low energy and compromised immune function. The Caucasus peoples enjoyed longevity of over 100 years.

Traditionally kefir is prepared by fermenting milk with kefir grains. The 'grains' look more like little cauliflower florets and have no relationship to cereal grains. Many refer to it as the kefir 'plant' instead. Kefir, prepared with a kefir



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plant, contains as many as 35 different strains of beneficial bacteria and yeasts.

THE GOOD GUYS

More than 400 different strains of bacteria live in the gastrointestinal tract (GI) or gut – the long hollow tube that runs from the tip

happens, digestive upsets such as flatulence, cramping, constipation and diarrhoea occur. Beneficial flora ensure the efficient absorption of nutrients from the food we ingest, and if digestion is severely compromised one will become malnourished and the stage will be set for degenerative disease.

WHAT ARE PROBIOTICS?

When we supplement with beneficial flora, we refer to them as probiotics. Probiotics are available in either a liquid, powder or capsule form, or can be accessed through our diet by eating a live wholefood product such as kefir, yoghurt or fermented vegetables. Most friendly bacteria come from the *Lactobacillus* or *Bifidobacterium* microbial groups. There are several different species of bacteria in each group. Some probiotics also consist of friendly yeasts.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF KEFIR

Kefir can be used instead of probiotics to restore the inner ecosystem after antibiotic therapy, and is simple and inexpensive to

‘The bacteria in kefir are potent detoxifiers’

of the tongue down to the rectum. Many of these micro-organisms are the beneficial flora/good bacteria that act as our personal bodyguards, protecting us from unfriendly bacteria, viruses and fungi. These ‘good guys’ play an important role in maintaining a healthy immune system. When the bad guys edge out the good guys there is an imbalance in the microorganisms in the GI. When this

make at home. Kefir is excellent nourishment for pregnant and nursing women, the elderly, and those with compromised immunity.

Kefir promotes healthy bowel movements when used regularly and helps reduce flatulence. It can lower blood pressure, reduce food cravings and control blood glucose. The bacteria in kefir are potent detoxifiers.



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NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF KEFIR

Kefir’s active yeast and bacteria content helps assimilate nutrients in the gut and enhance the usage of certain trace minerals and B-vitamins. Kefir is rich in vitamin B₁, B₁₂, and vitamin K. It is an excellent source of biotin, a B-vitamin which aids the body’s assimilation of other B-vitamins, such as folic acid, pantothenic acid, and B₁₂.

Kefir contains minerals and essential amino acids that help the body with healing and maintenance functions. The complete proteins in kefir are partially digested and therefore more easily utilised by the body. Tryptophan, one of the essential amino acids abundant in kefir, is well known for its relaxing effect on the nervous system. Kefir contains an abundance of calcium and magnesium, which are important minerals for a healthy nervous system and for a profound calming effect on the nerves. Kefir’s ample supply of phosphorus, the second most abundant mineral in our bodies, helps utilise carbohydrates, fats and proteins for cell growth, maintenance and energy.

YOGHURT VS KEFIR

Comparisons between yoghurt and kefir abound, yet kefir is more nutritious and therapeutic than yoghurt and it is considered the probiotic powerhouse for a variety of reasons. It contains several major strains of friendly bacteria not commonly found in yoghurt as well as beneficial yeasts, which dominate, control and eliminate destructive pathogenic yeasts in the body such as *Candida albicans* by penetrating the mucosal lining where unhealthy yeasts and bacteria reside.

Yoghurt contains transient beneficial bacteria that keep the digestive system clean, but kefir micro-organisms actually colonise and remain in the intestinal tract. Kefir’s active yeasts and bacteria provide more nutritive value than yoghurt by aiding digestion and by keeping the colon environment clean and healthy. Because the curd size of kefir is smaller than yoghurt, it is also easier to digest, which makes it a particularly nutritious food for babies, the elderly, and people experiencing chronic fatigue and digestive disorders.

WHAT IF I'M DAIRY OR LACTOSE INTOLERANT?

If you are lactose intolerant, the initial 24-hour fermentation will remove about 50% of the lactose present in milk. Ripening the kefir after straining for an additional 24 hours at room temperature or for several days in the refrigerator, will remove almost all the lactose.



Milk kefir grains can be used to ferment alternative milks such as soy milk, seed/nut milks, quinoa milk, coconut and rice milk. The grains will not grow in such mediums and will eventually stop fermenting, and kefir (the pale yellow polysaccharide gel exuded by dairy kefir) is not produced. One does, however, reap all the other benefits, especially the probiotic benefits of fermenting milk.

Another alternative is water or coconut water kefir. Water kefir grains are like squishy colourless crystals and are used to ferment sugar,

water and fruits. The water kefir starter grains, sometimes called Tibetan Mushrooms or Kefir Fungi, are a little more difficult to obtain than milk starter grains.

HOW TO INTRODUCE KEFIR INTO YOUR DIET

Some people thrive on kefir right from the start while others may need to proceed more slowly. Remember those with candidiasis lack milk-digesting bacteria, so may have to build up their 'tolerance' of kefir. Start with about 100 ml in the morning on an empty stomach. Every second day increase the amount until you are able to consume a full glass.

WHERE CAN I FIND KEFIR GRAINS?

Suppliers of kefir grains or plants include: Chantal Arends in Cape Town (082 9754243), Jenina Conradie in Knysna (083 2151786), and Ethical co-op (www.ethical.org). You can always enquire at your local health shop or google for further suppliers. Kefir retails for anything from R50 to around R85. Make sure you purchase from a reputable source.

Commercial powdered starters are available but contain fewer micro-organisms, while the commercial bottled kefir you buy in the store contains even fewer beneficial flora. Most bottled kefir contains *only* bacteria as the selling of beverages with live yeasts is usually not allowed. If you want kefir for its probiotic value, it makes the best sense to culture your own.

HOW TO MAKE KEFIR

Raw, organic full-cream cow's, sheep's, or goat's milk are great mediums for kefir fermentation. Ideally, the animals should have been grass-fed. Milk from grain-fed mammals is highly inflammatory due to abnormal essential fatty acid ratios. The milk should preferably not be pasteurised or homogenised, as these processes damage

the integrity of the amino acids and critical enzymes in the milk.

Add about ½ to 1 cup of milk to a clean large-mouthed glass or ceramic jar with a lid. Use a plastic spoon to transfer the kefir plant into the milk. Lightly screw on the lid so that gases can still escape. Leave the jar for about 12 to 72 hours at room temperature (ideally between 18 °C and 30 °C). The fermentation time will depend on the temperature, but usually the longer the better. By ripening kefir for 48 hours, the content of folic acid is increased by 116%. Ensure that it is not exposed to direct sunlight, as direct heat would kill the kefir plant.

When you see a line running horizontally on the side of the bottle or when it resembles the consistency of yoghurt, the kefir is ready to use. Remove the kefir plant with a plastic spoon or strain through a plastic sieve and transfer the plant to a clean jar with milk to ferment again at room temperature. Do not consume the kefir plant, only the fermented milk. Either consume immediately or store it in the refrigerator for up to 14 days.

If you are going on holiday, or don't want to make kefir for a couple of days, leave the kefir plant in milk in the refrigerator. This will slow down the fermentation process. However, change the milk every couple of weeks to prevent disintegration of the plant. Never touch the kefir plant with metal utensils, it will die. Only use plastic utensils and a glass or ceramic jar and work as hygienically as possible. If properly cared for, the kefir plant will outlive you!

Any or a combination of the following ingredients can be added to give the kefir more zing:

- 1 tsp of unrefined oil such as flaxseed, hempseed or argan oil

- Lecithin, which aids fat digestion, to taste
- Fibre such as oat bran, psyllium husk or apple pectin
- Natural flavourings such as stevia, raw honey, unrefined sugar, nutmeg, cinnamon or vanilla extract
- Fresh or frozen organic fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, bananas, kiwi or mango

Blend together for a delicious, nutritious breakfast, lunch or snack. Enjoy! ●



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