



Cultured Dairy

In a world before refrigerators, fluid milk was almost useless, since it would spoil in a matter of hours during most months of the year. Around the world, different civilizations evolved their own ways of preserving milk using fermentation, with bacterial cultures, to turn it into products like yogurt, kefir and cheese.

Fermentation enhances the taste of these products, improves the digestibility of the milk used, and naturally increases shelf life. In addition to the nutrients derived from milk, a benefit of eating fermented dairy foods is that they provide healthy probiotics that are good for our digestive tracts. Read on, to learn more.

Yogurt

Fermentation (or culturing) is a bacterial process that converts sugar to acids, gases or alcohol; in the case of yogurt, live active cultures such as *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophiles*, convert the milk sugar (called lactose) to lactic acid, giving yogurt its characteristic texture and tang.

Today, most yogurts are described by the percentage of milk fat they contain, and/or the style in which they're made. Here's a quick guide that can help you choose the one that's best for you.

Milk Fat Percentage

Regular yogurt is made from whole milk and has at least 3.4 percent milk fat, or approximately 10 grams of fat per cup.

Low-fat yogurt is made from low-fat milk or part-skim milk and has between 2 and 0.5 percent milk fat, up to 3.5 grams of fat per cup.

Non-fat yogurt is made from skim milk and contains less than 0.5 percent milk fat, less than 1 gram of fat.



Styles of Yogurt

Greek (Strained)

Greek yogurt goes through the fermentation process explained above and then is strained to remove the liquid whey, giving the yogurt a thick, creamy texture and extra-tangy taste. Nutritionally, Greek yogurt has more protein per serving than non-strained yogurts, because it's been concentrated – but also less calcium, since some calcium is lost in the whey.

Plain or Unflavored Yogurt

No added flavor, just the tang of the yogurt defines this product, which can be made from cow, sheep or goat milk.

Swiss or Custard-Style Yogurt

In this type of yogurt, fruit and yogurt are mixed together. Often times a stabilizer, such as pectin or gelatin, is used to ensure a consistent, firm texture. Also known as blended yogurt.



Fruit on the Bottom or Sundae-Style Yogurt

Just as it's labeled, the fruit is on the bottom of the container and the yogurt is on top. (If you turned the container upside down and released the contents on a plate, it would look like a sundae.) It can be eaten as is or the fruit mixed into the yogurt to make it smooth and creamy.

So, with all the styles and fat content differentiation among yogurt, what's the best choice?

Nutritionally, plain yogurt, the only ingredients of which are milk or cream and live, active cultures is the best option. It doesn't have added sugar or fillers, but delivers more calcium – and fewer calories – than yogurts with fruit added. For an extra boost of protein, try plain Greek yogurt.

Look for products that contain “live and active cultures” (and aren't heat treated) to ensure you'll be getting the benefits of these healthy probiotics.

If you like to have a little sweetness, try adding sliced or chopped fruits or berries or even a drizzle of honey to your plain yogurt. Frozen fruit without added sugar, or fresh fruit work equally well. For a bit of crunch and texture, top with chopped nuts of your choice. You'll enjoy the goodness of sweet and tangy while controlling your intake of salt and sugar. Now that's something to celebrate!

Key information on yogurt packaging:

Made with live and active cultures

L. bulgaricus and *S. thermophiles* are two beneficial bacteria that must be used in order for a product to be called “yogurt,” per federal regulations. To know whether your product contains them read the ingredient list (they should be listed after milk), or look for the National Yogurt Association's “Live and Active Cultures” seal.

Heat-treated (after culturing)

After fermentation, some yogurts are heated to kill the beneficial live and active cultures. Manufacturers will heat treat their yogurt to give it a longer shelf life or to make it less tangy and more pudding-like. Yogurt is healthier when its cultures are still live.

Grams of sugar

Many yogurts are loaded with sugar. How can you tell how much? Milk contains a natural sugar called lactose. A cup of plain yogurt will have about 11 grams of sugar even when it has no added sugar. If your flavored yogurt says it has 39 grams of sugar in each cup, you'll know it has 28 grams (39 minus 11) of added sugar – a whopping seven teaspoonfuls!

Recommended Daily Serving: 8 ounces (1 cup)

Kefir can be enjoyed as a stand-alone drink, blended into smoothies, or used as a substitute for buttermilk in baking.

Kefir

A fermented milk drink, kefir is produced with a yeast/bacterial starter called kefir “grains,” producing a slightly sour, carbonated beverage. Often described as a thin liquid yogurt, kefir can be made from cow, goat or sheep milk. Like yogurt, it contains probiotics (“good” bacteria) for a healthy gut, and is an excellent source of protein and calcium.

Kefir can be enjoyed as a stand-alone drink, blended into smoothies, or used as a substitute for buttermilk in baking.

Like its yogurt sibling, kefir may have flavorings and sugar added which boost the amount of calories per serving. It's best to buy it plain and stir in your own flavoring like vanilla or diced fruit so you can control the amount of sugar and sodium in each serving.

Recommended daily serving: 8 ounces (1 cup)



Cheese

Like other dairy products, cheese provides essential nutrients. Hard and semi-soft cheeses such as cheddar, Swiss, Parmesan, and Gouda may offer probiotic benefits, too because they also go through a fermentation process similar to yogurt.

But cheese can be high in saturated fat so it should be enjoyed in moderation, usually 1-1/2 ounces per day for most adults.

In an effort to reduce saturated fat intake (in hopes of lowering LDL, or bad, cholesterol) some manufacturers retooled their recipes and now offer low-fat versions of their products; low-fat cheese for example can save several grams of fat and calories to boot with each serving.

The downside of low-fat cheese is that it often doesn't taste as good, or melt the same way as its full-fat cousin, and most importantly, some low-fat cheese has added ingredients including fillers and extra sodium.

While a low-fat version may save you a few calories and grams of saturated fat, you can miss out on the mouth feel of full-fat cheese that gives a sense of satiety.

The good news is that a small amount of a full-fat cheese can fit in a balanced diet filled with vegetables, fruits, and rounded out with lean protein, whole grains, legumes and nuts. So, as long as you eat a variety of whole foods and stay within the daily recommendation, you can have your cheese and enjoy it without guilt, too!

Recommended dairy serving: 1-1/2 ounces

The Good News

A small amount of a full-fat cheese can fit in a balanced diet filled with vegetables, fruits, and rounded out with lean protein, whole grains, legumes and nuts.