



Fermented Foods for Good Gut Health

Bacteria are often cast as the enemies of good health, but in fact, your body contains more bacteria than there are humans on the face of the earth – and most of these are “good” bacteria that you couldn’t live without. The friendly bacteria in our bodies crowd out dangerous bacteria and perform many useful functions, especially in our digestive tract, where bacteria help us digest our food.

“**Good**” **Bacteria** perform the same two essential functions in food itself: they crowd out bad bacteria, and aid digestion. Let’s take traditional cheese as an example. We all know that milk left unrefrigerated goes bad in a hurry. So how does it turn into cheese? A skilled cheesemaker encourages the growth of specific beneficial bacteria that transform the milk, fermenting it and changing its texture and taste. As these good bacteria multiply, they outnumber and overpower any bad bacteria, keeping the cheese safe for consumption.

At the same time, the good bacteria turn the milk into something that’s easier for most humans to digest. Many people who are lactose intolerant may not be able to digest fresh milk but can tolerate yogurt, cheese and other fermented dairy foods.

Fermentation – the word we use to describe the breakdown of food by beneficial bacteria – is one of mankind’s oldest ways of preserving food. Here are just a few fermented foods that have long been enjoyed in traditional cultures, and can now be found in many grocery stores:

- ◆ **Sauerkraut** (Germany – fermented cabbage)
- ◆ **Kimchi** (Korea – fermented vegetables)
- ◆ **Miso** (Japan – fermented beans, grains)
- ◆ **Tempeh** (Indonesia – fermented beans and sometimes grains)
- ◆ **Cheese** (Many traditions – fermented milk)
- ◆ **Yogurt** (Many traditions, including Lassi in India – fermented milk)
- ◆ **Kombucha** (various Asian traditions – fermented tea)



It’s important to shop carefully for fermented foods. Because fermentation is an inexact and not totally predictable science involving the growth of living organisms, many food companies have created modern versions of the foods above that are more uniform and consistent but without the health benefits of fermentation.

Read the Label – When buying yogurt, for instance, look for unsweetened varieties, and check the ingredient list to ensure that it contains live cultures. With cheese, look for artisanal, traditionally-made cheese, especially raw-milk cheese, and skip the “processed American cheese food.” Vegetables have traditionally been pickled with fermentation (kimchi and sauerkraut are the best examples) but today many commercial pickled vegetables use a vinegar brine solution to pickle the produce. If you see vinegar on the ingredient list, the product is likely not fermented.

Look for more and more true fermented foods on grocery shelves, as research increasingly shows that eating such foods can help support the good bacteria in our guts that help us maintain our good health.