

Miracle Milk

Its supporters insist that kefir, a fermented yoghurt-like drink, can help to cure digestive disorders, boost the immune system and, some claim it prevents cancer. So should we all be drinking it, asks Sarah Warwick?

Anyone with an interest in natural health will be aware of the benefits of probiotics and the plethora of drinks, yoghurts and capsules available for boosting our digestive health. This concept is nothing new though. Over 1,000 years ago, shepherds living in the Caucasus Mountains (now the area of Georgia and Azerbaijan) would make their own probiotic drink by adding kefir grains to goat's or cow's milk and letting it ferment for days inside a leather bag. This thick, slightly fizzy drink was found to have many health benefits and was highly prized by the shepherds, who became known for living long and healthy lives.

Kefir has been a popular drink in central Asia since at least the time of Marco Polo's visit there in the 13th century. Over the centuries, its popularity has spread across Eurasia, from Kazakhstan to Poland, although kefir was largely unheard of in the west until the 19th century, when immigrants from Eastern Europe brought it to the UK and America.

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Where to buy

Kefir can be bought in a ready-made format from health shops, or you can make it yourself by combining kefir grains and milk and allowing it to ferment for several hours. The grains look a little like cauliflower heads and have a glossy off-white colour. They can be bought from the internet but it is perhaps best to obtain them from a reputable health shop.

KEFIR FACTS

Over the last decade, kefir has become increasingly popular among the natural health community, for its beneficial effect on the digestive and immune systems. "Kefir is loaded with a whole range of probiotic bacteria – these are basically the 'good' bacteria that we all need in our gut," says Lisa Blair, a nutritional therapist and metabolic balance coach at the London Nutrition Centre. "It replenishes the body's intestinal flora, part of the gut's immune system, and can help 'crowd out' the bad stuff and thus prevent it from overgrowing and causing digestive problems."

Water kefir

"The only people who should be cautious of milk-based kefir are those who are lactose intolerant," says Lisa Blair. For those people there is 'tibicos', which is made from water kefir grains in the same fermentation process as the milk version but with sugar water or juice. "However, it is worth noting that milk kefir is actually easier for people with a lactose issue to digest than milk, as it is a fermented product," adds Lisa.

Lisa recommends kefir to her patients for the treatment of intestinal disorders such as bloating, constipation and flatulence. "It's not

going to cure these conditions," she says, "but it can play a role in helping to alleviate the symptoms. And it's good just to help create a healthier digestive system."

As part of a regular diet, kefir can also help to strengthen the immune system and regulate conditions like candida, where there is an overgrowth of yeast in the body, resulting in symptoms such as fatigue, joint pain and skin problems.

Curing candida

Dawn Fisher, 28, an accountant from London, started taking kefir to counteract a candida

Do it yourself

To start making your own kefir, the first step is to get hold of some grains from a reputable health shop. Then, wash the grains with distilled or filtered water and prepare them a good home. Ideally, this should be a wide plastic or glass container with a loose fitting lid, so the container is covered but still has access to air. A small Tupperware box is ideal.



Cover the grains with milk (or water if using water kefir). This can be any kind of milk, including cow's, goat's, soy or even coconut, and you may want to try different varieties to find the one that's right for you. Organic is obviously better than non-organic and most people prefer whole milk as this will make the kefir less sour.

Leave the tub somewhere cool and dark (but not in a fridge) for 12 to 36 hours. The more time you leave it the thicker and sourer it will get. After 12 hours or so it will have a distinctive tangy smell, which means it has fermented. It might also have a slightly fizzy consistency.

Kefir grains react badly to metal and touching them with any metal object – even stainless steel – could cause them to die off. For this reason, you will need a plastic sieve and a wooden spoon to strain your liquid off. Pour the substance through the sieve into a bowl and use the spoon to squeeze the remaining kefir out of the grains. While the grains are in the sieve use the opportunity to wash out your tub with filtered water before adding more milk and leaving to ferment again.

With love and care your grains will last indefinitely, but they feed from the sugars in the milk so care must be taken not to leave them too long so all the lactose has been fermented. If you want to go away for more than a day put your grains in a cup of milk in the fridge where they will go to sleep.

imbalance. "I'd been suffering from persistent thrush and regular stomach aches and doctors couldn't suggest anything," she explains. "A friend



Body | KEFIR

Tried & tested

Sarah Warwick had a go at making her own kefir – here's how she got on

I had high hopes for my kefir experiment, having decided to make and drink my own homemade milk kefir every day for a month. I wanted to know if it would make a difference to my sluggishness and troubled skin.

Luckily I was able to get my grains from a contact who generously let me have them for nothing. I covered these grains with whole milk and left them for 24 hours. As it was a hot day the fermentation process happened very quickly and when I returned I found that the milk had separated into a thick curd and a watery yellow liquid. Not very appetising!

As if that wasn't bad enough I'd had trouble finding a small plastic sieve so ended up buying an enormous one from the local pound shop and this spilt kefir everywhere. Blending the curd and water together with my wooden spoon, I persevered with my first few gulps. It was very sour. The aftertaste wasn't unpleasant, but I did get some acid reflux.

After a couple of days of this very sour experience, I decided to return to my research to see if I was doing it right. The good thing about growing your own kefir is that the end result can be tinkered with, according to personal taste. I soon realised that leaving the tub out for less time or adding milk or honey to the end result made it more palatable. I could even add berries or fruits to it to make a morning smoothie.

By day five I was on a roll. Sieving before my breakfast had become second nature. Taking it on an empty stomach seemed to work best, with no more acid reflux and I was feeling as fit as a fiddle.

Over the next three weeks my skin cleared up, I felt less tired and had more energy. Apart from finding a place in my kitchen for the enormous plastic sieve, kefir has been a positive addition to my health and wellbeing. I think I'm a convert.

you can say is that, as part of a healthy balanced lifestyle, kefir is one element that can support a healthy immune system."

suggested trying kefir as she'd had a good experience with it. At first it was a bit of a gimmick, but when my symptoms pretty much disappeared after taking it for a week I became a convert." She's now been taking it every day for four months.

Cancer claims

Dawn's not alone in reporting the positive effects of the drink. Type 'kefir' into Google and you'll find endless pages of people claiming that, among other things, it "heals the lungs, bronchitis, tuberculosis, asthma, allergies and migraine" and – the most astounding claim of all – it "produces own anti-cancer compounds, prevents metastasis and leads to cure".

This theory that kefir can help to cure cancer is supported by Klaus Kaufmann in his book *Kefir Rediscovered* (Alive Books). Kaufmann suggests that it is in the fermentation process that kefir (and other 'ferments') gets its superpowers: "Ferments are the ultimate promoters of continued good health," he writes. "They help the diseased body reassemble



healthy tissues. Some of the most respected scientists have suggested a pathway by which lactic acid fermentation might fight mutant cancer cells."

Lisa Blair, however, is more cautious regarding such claims. "Some of the health benefits made for kefir are a bit exaggerated," she says. "I would be highly skeptical about making cancer prevention claims. I think that all