



NATURAL SOLUTIONS

Clinical Kinesiology, Acupuncture, & (w)Holistic Healthcare

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Fabulous Fermented Foods

Written by Jen Allbritton, CN

Did you know there are more bacteria in the intestines than stars in the sky? In addition to their ability to stimulate immunity, beneficial gut “bugs” manufacture vitamins, detoxify environmental chemicals, and help metabolize hormones and other substances in the body. On the other hand, unfriendly organisms in the intestinal tract can cause infection and produce toxic products, including a host of carcinogens. Obviously, proliferation of the healthy “bugs” can have a tremendous impact on wellness. An easy way to encourage this proliferation is through consuming fermented foods. This is just one of the many reasons these foods are “foods to favor”.

Way Back When

Fermentation is one of the oldest and most economical methods of preserving foods. Originally produced out of necessity, these foods wound up offering the added advantage of beneficial bacteria, enzymes, and better nutrition.⁷ Today, in almost every culture there still exists at least one fermented food.¹ Although these foods have been providing their health giving properties for centuries, science is just starting to realize what native cultures around the world have known for so long – fermented foods are healthy to consume.

In fact, a dentist named Weston A. Price noticed the value of fermented foods as early as the 1930s. After studying the traditional diets and vibrant health of more than a dozen non-industrialized societies around the world, he noticed that one of the common traits among the people was they all consumed fermented food each day. In fact, it has been suggested that the benefits provided by fermented foods is one key to longevity and good health in many native societies around the world.^{4,7}

What Is Actually Going On?

Fermentation is essentially the predigesting of a food. Lactic-acid-producing bacteria naturally found in the leaves and roots of plants break down the complex components of the food, rev the enzymatic motors, and naturally preserve it. They also inhibit the growth of unfavorable bacteria while helping other good bacteria proliferate.^{2,3} Fermented foods have the added benefits of greater nutritional value and enhanced digestibility.^{1,4}

Fermented Food Options

Amasake is an unrefined, sweet cultured Japanese mixture of water and sweet rice, and is fermented with the bacteria koji. This thick malt-like drink can be consumed as a sweet warm or cold treat and used to sweeten baked goods.



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Apple Cider Vinegar (raw and unfiltered) is fermented vinegar that encourages growth of the beneficial bacteria that fight harmful yeast overgrowth (e.g. candida) and other unhealthy flora.⁵ Use it in dressings, sauces, and marinades.

Fermented Dairy Products include yogurt, buttermilk, kefir, some cheeses, cultured butter, and cottage cheese. Soured milk products are already predigested by the bacterial action of the souring process and are more easily digested by a greater majority of people than milk. In addition, other properties of milk are transformed by the souring: lactose is converted into lactic acid, and casein (milk protein) is partially broken down.^{4,6} The culturing of dairy products also enhances the enzyme content of the food.⁴ **Kefir** is a yogurt-like, microbial-rich drink. It is made by adding fermenting organisms called kefir “grains” into milk. You can make a homemade version out of any kind of milk; however Helios Nutrition provides a tasty and bacteria-packed organic cow milk product found in the dairy case.

Fermented soy products include tempeh, miso, soy sauce, and tamari. **Tempeh** is a traditional Indonesian food made by splitting, cooking, and fermenting soybeans.² It can be used as a meat alternative in chilies, tacos, or cooked on its own with garlic, ginger, curry, or coriander. It can also be marinated and cooked on the grill. **Miso** is a fermented paste made of soybeans, a koji inoculant, salt, and a grain, most often rice or barley. There are different varieties and generally the darker the color, the more potent its medicinal properties.² Use in place of Worcestershire sauce, salt, and soy sauce, or as a seasoning agent in soup, sauces, and dressings. It is best to not boil or cook miso for long since that will destroy its beneficial microorganisms. **Soy Sauce and Tamari** are both made of soybeans, salt, and water. If traditionally made, both sauces are aged for a year or more. They both are nutritive flavor enhancers and because they are fermented, they encourage better digestion. It is best to add these ingredients during the last few minutes of cooking to preserve the flavor and health properties.² Use in place of salt in soups, stir-fried vegetables, dressings, and marinades. Note: most commercial products are chemically brewed in a 24-hour process and do not have the same benefits; natural foods brands are more likely to use the traditional process.

Raw Cultured Vegetables, such as sauerkraut, are tangy tasting vegetables that have been cut or shredded and left in a sanitary environment for a few days at the right temperature. This lets the lactobacilli and enzymes that are naturally present in the vegetables proliferate.⁵ Lacto-fermented foods are easy to make; refer to the books *Nourishing Traditions* by Sally Fallon or *The Body Ecology Diet* by Donna Gates.

Some other fermented foods include brown rice vinegar, umeboshi (plum and vinegar), Kombucha, nattō, and sourdough bread. Lacto-fermented foods should be eaten in small quantities, more like condiments. Also, if a fermented food smells or tastes repugnant, do not consume it.⁴



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In healthy individuals there is a balance of good and bad bacteria. The good “bugs” in the gut are sensitive critters and are easily destroyed by poor diet (including sugar, white flour, and junk food), alcohol, smoking, medications, antibiotics (prescription and those found in our commercial animal by-products), chemicals (e.g. chlorine in water, and pesticides in food), and stress.^{7,8,9,10} These factors open the door for pathogenic bacteria to attack, which can lead to more sickness and poor health.

Generally, if you have robust health and good elimination (meaning 2-3 easily expelled bowel movements daily), your beneficial colonies are most likely in balance. To maintain good balance, consider eating a serving of fermented food daily along with a whole foods diet. On the other hand, if you are often sick or feel under the weather, have taken antibiotics often, and are under a lot of stress, you should consider consuming more than one serving per day. A probiotics supplement can also be used to repopulate and maintain the digestive system with healthy microorganisms.

Here is the bottom line: consuming fermented foods on a regular basis will not only provide better nutrition, but will enhance your inner ecology, which will heighten overall health. Remember, not all bacteria are bad. Go proliferate the good!

¹ International Food Information Service. Traditional Fermented Foods found at www.ifis.org/, April 1998. Found on June 1, 2001.

² Wood, Rebecca. 1999. *The New Whole Foods Encyclopedia*. Penguin, NY, NY, p. 135.

³ Fallon, Sally and Enig, Mary Ph.D. *Lacto-Fermentation*. Found on www.westonaprice.com on Dec 28th, 2001.

⁴ Fallon, Sally. *Nourishing Traditions*. ProMotion Publishing. Sand Diego, CA. 1995.

⁵ Gates, Donna. *The Body Ecology Diet*. B.E.D. Publications. Atlanta Georgia. 1996.

⁶ Pitchford, Paul. *Health with Whole Foods*. North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, CA. 1993.

⁷ Emerich, Monica. Culture Club. Delicious! Nutrition Advisor. 1998. Found on www.healthwell.com on June 1, 2001.

⁸ Holzapfel WH, Haberer P et al. Overview of gut flora and probiotic. *Int J of Food Microbial*. 1998;41:85-101.

⁹ Hobbs, Christopher. Pro-Life Therapy with Probiotics, The use of Acidophilus and other Beneficial Bacteria as Dietary Supplements. 1996. Found on www.healthy.net.

¹⁰ Trenev, Natasha. Probiotics: Nature’s Internal Healers. 1998. Avery Publishing Group, New York