

5 Fermented Foods to Control Weight and Blood Sugar in Diabetes



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Go With Your Gut: Why Fermented Foods Can Be Good for Diabetes



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The pursuit of a healthy gut is a popular goal right now, and you may hear many people touting the benefits of fermented foods, like sauerkraut, miso, or kombucha. In these foods, bacteria ferment sugars or carbohydrates,

delivering a unique flavor to that food — and perhaps health benefits for people with diabetes, too.

It all has to do with the [gut microbiome](#), the environment of bacteria that live in your gut, which potentially affects your immune system, your weight, and your risk for certain chronic diseases, according to a [review published in January 2016 in the journal *Current Opinion in Gastroenterology*](#). Meanwhile, other studies, like those explored in a review published in January 2015 in the journal *Diabetes Care*, have found that changes in the gut microbiome may play a particular role in individuals' risk for [obesity and type 2 diabetes](#).

Maintaining this collection of natural bacteria can help us stay healthy and potentially increase our longevity, research suggests, whereas other factors, such as not finishing a prescribed round of antibiotics, possessing certain dietary habits, and having impaired bowel function, can have an impact on this balance.

The idea has inspired dozens of books on achieving and maintaining a healthy gut — with the majority of them offering dietary advice to help people lose unwanted weight. And at the center of it all? Fermented foods.

Not only can these eats help promote [gastrointestinal \(GI\)](#) health and wellness — and potentially even your mood, [some research](#) suggests — but they're also often rich with [fiber](#), a component of food that can promote feelings of fullness, thereby promoting a healthy weight, and help stabilize blood sugar if you have type 2 diabetes. According to the [Joslin Diabetes Center](#), most Americans eat only half the amount of recommended fiber per day, which is between 20 to 35 grams (g).

While “there’s no one miracle food, especially in terms of diabetes,” says Laura Cipullo, RD, CDE, fermented foods can be a good choice for people with diabetes for those very reasons.

Still, says Cipullo, more research is needed.

Hannah El-Amin, a diabetes educator with Nutrition That Fits in Chicago,

recommends incorporating a source of fermented foods into your daily [diabetes diet](#), considering the potential benefits you may be able to reap. “It’s worth it to give fermented foods a try,” she says, adding that they may also produce compounds that lower blood sugar directly and stimulate your liver to absorb more glucose.

That said, every person is different, so make sure you monitor how your blood sugar responds after eating these foods. And if fermented foods aren’t your thing – as they tend to have an acquired, sour taste – you don’t need them to be healthy as someone with diabetes, says Cipullo.

If you’re looking to incorporate them into your diet, consider giving these five fermented foods to try.

Kefir for Protein, Vitamin D, and Calcium

Jill



Chen/Stocksy

This cultured milk drink is a great [source of protein](#) (about 11 g per cup), and it’s also packed with a quarter of the [vitamin D](#) you need daily, plus nearly one-third of the recommended calcium.

“When you’re going to start eating fermented foods, kefir is a good place to begin,” says El-Amin. That’s because there is research out there suggesting the sip is healthy for those with diabetes. In a [study published in February 2015 in the Iranian Journal of Public Health](#), researchers conducted a randomized double-blind placebo-control trial on 60 patients with diabetes. The group who drank 2.5 cups of kefir daily benefited from lower [hemoglobin A1C levels](#) compared with the control group.

Choose plain kefir, as fruit-flavored versions can pack in a couple of teaspoons of added sugar per serving. The taste is tangier than even plain yogurt (and some are slightly fizzy, too), so experiment by trying a variety of brands until you find the one you like.

Rather than drinking it plain, El-Amin suggests adding kefir to a [diabetes-friendly smoothie](#), along with apples, spinach, and cinnamon. You can also use it in a savory yogurt-dressed salad, mixing kefir with lemon juice and stirring into chopped tomatoes and cucumbers, she suggests.

Low-Sugar Kombucha for a Healthy Alternative to Soda



Oksana Bratanova/Alamy

If you like diet or regular soda but are trying to limit your [sugar](#) intake, you may really appreciate kombucha. It's a fizzy, tangy fermented tea drink with almost a vinegar-like taste. The main concern: There's sugar added during the fermentation process, points out Cipullo. "You have to be mindful if this is something that will affect your [blood sugar](#), especially if you're drinking it by itself," she says.

Cipullo also points out that if you are drinking nonpasteurized kombucha (which could contain low levels of naturally occurring alcohol) and are on insulin medication, this may also impact your blood sugar.

Despite the added sugar, preliminary research suggests it still may be appropriate for those with diabetes. A [study published in May 2012 in the journal *BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine*](#), which was done on rats, suggested that compared with black tea, kombucha helped lower blood sugar and [cholesterol levels](#), as well as reduce oxidative stress and free radicals in the animals. Obviously, you're not a rat, so studies on humans are needed to confirm this benefit.

If you're drinking kombucha, El-Amin recommends comparing bottles and choosing a low-sugar variety. Many varieties add stevia to keep the taste sweet but the sugar content low. Those are great options. "Stevia is safe and great for people with diabetes because it doesn't raise blood sugar," she says.

Sauerkraut for a Flavorful Addition to Grilled Meats



Although sauerkraut is traditionally served alongside sausage, with diabetes, it's best to try to limit your intake of processed meats in favor of [fresh, lean choices](#), like fatty fish, turkey, and boneless, skinless chicken breast. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy this delicious condiment. Made of fermented cabbage, sauerkraut is a zippy addition to grilled lean meats and can even be added to salads for a dose of big flavor.

One thing to watch out for: Sauerkraut can be high in salt. One-quarter cup contains 360 milligrams (mg) of sodium, or more than one-fifth of the 1,500 mg limit of what someone with diabetes should eat in an entire day, according to the [American Heart Association](#). "Don't eat sauerkraut in excess. This is a case where it's smart to have a small amount spread throughout the day — rather than sitting down to a whole bowl," Cipullo says. Also, be wary of how acidic foods like sauerkraut are affecting how you feel. If you suffer from [acid reflux, or gastroesophageal reflux disease \(GERD\)](#), as many people with diabetes do, choosing other fermented foods, like kefir, may be a better option for you, she suggests.

Tempeh for a Low-Sodium Source of Protein



Harald Walker/Stocksy

If you like tofu, you should also try tempeh. This food is made from fermented [soybeans](#) — and before you say "no way," know it can be incredibly delicious! A 3.5-ounce serving contains 195 calories and an impressive 20 g of protein, all for only 8 g of carbohydrates. The sodium count is naturally low, which is another great perk.

In a [study published in December 2012 in the *European Journal of Nutrition*](#) that looked at middle-aged Chinese adults, those who reported eating unsweetened soy products at least once weekly had a 24 percent lower [risk of developing diabetes](#) in the first place, potentially in part due to compounds called isoflavones.

Because tempeh, like tofu, takes up the flavors of what it's paired with, you may want to marinate it before eating. In that case, watch the sodium level on the marinade. Often whipping one up at home can save on salt — so, too, can making a salt-free spice rub to coat the tempeh. To cook, cut into strips and steam, sauté, or grill until nice and crispy.

Vinegar for a Reduced-Calorie Way to Add Flavor to Food



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There are numerous possible perks for using vinegar on your foods, especially if you have diabetes. For one, most contain zero or very few calories, but the flavor they can add is unmatched. In fact, they're a great way to boost the taste without adding [extra salt](#).

Vinegar is [made when](#) yeast turns sugars into alcohol, then when bacteria turns the alcohol into acid. In some brands you can even see the "mother" — a cloudy looking mass in the bottle. It shouldn't scare you, but if you don't like it, buy pasteurized vinegars.

While more research is needed across the board, El-Amin notes, some studies suggest it may [improve glycemic control](#). A [study published in February 2010 in the journal *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism*](#), found that taking 2 teaspoons of vinegar with a [carbohydrate](#)-containing meal helped blunt the rise of [blood sugar after eating](#) by 20 percent compared with a placebo. Vinegar may also help muscles absorb glucose, helping improve carbohydrate metabolism, according to a [study published in June 2015 in the *Journal of Diabetes Research*](#).

To incorporate vinegar into your dishes, El-Amin recommends using it to make your own salad dressing at home (all you need is olive oil and vinegar), drizzle it on veggies (she likes to dip carrots into it), or stir a splash into a tomato-based dish to brighten the flavor.