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## [The Flat Belly Food You Don't Know About: Kefir](#)

*Men's Health* Editor in Chief David Zincenko recently touted a product called [kefir](#) as one of summer's [six essential flat belly foods](#). But unless you hail from Russia or really pay attention when perusing the yogurt aisle at the grocery store, chances are, you've never heard of this 2,000-year-old nutritional rock star.

Kefir is a creamy, yogurt-like smoothie that you can drink straight from the bottle or jazz up with fruit, granola, and other fun add-ins. The taste can be addictive, but it's not necessarily sweet like the foil-lidded yogurts you're used to. It's actually tangier, more reminiscent of Greek yogurt (love [Chobani!](#)) or sour cream. Besides containing less sugar and more protein than conventional yogurt, kefir is packed with [probiotics](#) (a buzzword meaning "beneficial to life" which you've surely read about), bacteria that help maintain the natural balance of organisms in the intestines. Standard yogurts only have one or a few strains of these live and active cultures -- for instance, I'm looking in my fridge right now at a [Berries N' Cream Yoplait Light](#), and it only lists *Lactobacillus acidophilus*. Next to the Yoplait is a bottle of [Lifeway Lowfat Pomegranate Kefir](#), which contains a whopping 10 strains (*Lactobacillus Lacti*, *Lactobacillus rhamnosus*, *Bifidobacterium Longum*, *Bifidobacterium Breve*, *Lactobacillus Acidophilus*, *Saccharomyces florentinus*, *Streptococcus Diacetylactis*, *Leuconostoc Cremoris*, *Lactobacillus Plantarum*, *Lactobacillus Case*.) (Interestingly, other very popular yogurts that tout their probiotic activity, like Dannon Activia, only contain one strain of live/active cultures, Bifidus Regularis™ -- a strain which Dannon selected and named.

Some other yogurt versus kefir differences that highlight kefir's nutritional powerhouse status:

**Calories:** 100 (6 oz. of Yoplait) versus 160 (8 oz. of Lifeway kefir)

**Fiber:** 0g versus 3 grams

**Protein:** 5 grams versus 11 grams

**Calcium:** 20% Daily Value versus 30%

Besides its satiety-inducing protein, *Men's Health's* EIC Zincenko said he named kefir to his list of flat belly foods because its probiotics may speed weight loss. [Research from the University of Tennessee](#) has shown that consuming three to four servings of dairy products a day may help men and women shed more pounds than cutting out dairy (a common, but erroneous, weight loss tactic.) For the real 411 on kefir and weight loss, I weighed in with [Jennifer Ventrelle MS, RD](#), a registered dietitian at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago and owner of the private practice Weight No More:

**There's been a lot in the media over the past few years about low-fat dairy and weight loss. Is it true? Can adding a few servings to your diet help with weight loss and if so, how?**

*There have been some studies that have shown to reduce belly fat in people who consumed 3 servings of low-fat dairy products daily. The effect was not found to be as great for those individuals who got calcium from supplemental sources. The thought is that when there is more dietary calcium in the cells, fat is more likely to be burned instead of stored.*

## **Do you recommend products like kefir to your weight loss clients? What do you like about kefir in general or in particular?**

*Yes -- I do recommend this product. I tell them to get the low-fat versions and talk about the benefits of not only calcium from this product, but the probiotics as well. I do caution my clients, however, since this product is slightly high in sugar, to be sure to limit their intake to 1 cup in a sitting... especially for my diabetic clients. One benefit is that it is also high protein. I tell my clients that it can be a great snack on its own!*

Besides helping you into your skinny jeans, kefir can also be used medicinally to treat and soothe a variety of health care issues.

**Immune system-boosting:** For individuals being treated with medications such as antibiotics, kefir can help by replenishing protective intestinal flora which can be destroyed during treatment. (Antibiotics go after "bad" bacteria in the body but may also kill the "good" bacteria in the large intestine in the process. The result: stomach discomfort and diarrhea.) According to a November 2008 study published in *American Family Physician*, up to one in five individuals on antibiotics stop taking their medicine before completing the full course of therapy due to diarrhea. But, [researchers from Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University](#) said, physicians could help patients avoid this problem by prescribing probiotics. A single-month supply of supplemental probiotics can cost between \$8 and \$22; a 32-oz. bottle of kefir costs about \$3.00.

**Lactose intolerance:** Probiotic cultures "predigest" some of the lactose in dairy products, making kefir a terrific milk product for people suffering from lactose intolerance. A [recent study](#) in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* examined people struggling with lactose intolerance and found that kefir can actually improve lactose digestion. The reasoning? Kefir's live, active bacteria cultures help break down the sugars in milk. The researchers asked 15 adults to try five test foods: 2% milk; plain kefir; raspberry-flavored kefir; plain yogurt; and raspberry-flavored yogurt, each following a 12-hour fast. Study participants reported having little or no symptoms associated with lactose intolerance after eating both types of yogurt and kefir. In fact, drinking kefir reduced flatulence frequency by more than half when compared with milk.

**Irritable Bowel Syndrome:** IBS is not a disease, per se, but a grouping of symptoms including abdominal pain or discomfort, cramping, bloating, gas, diarrhea, and/or constipation. Dietary changes are often suggested as a first-line defense against IBS. After all, why take medication if adding or subtracting certain foods could help? Many studies show that adding certain types of yogurt -- specifically, those containing the bacteria lactobacilli and bifidobacteria -- to your diet may alleviate the symptoms of IBS. These "good" bacteria are normally found in the large intestine, but adding them to your diet can help with gas, pain and bloating, while reducing the time it takes for food to move through the intestine, says [Mayo Clinic gastroenterologist Michael Picco, MD](#). This, in turn, may be helpful in people with constipation; probiotics may also decrease the frequency of loose stools, improving IBS-related diarrhea. In one [recent UK study](#), IBS sufferers who received a probiotic preparation made up of multiple strains of *Lactobacillus Acidophilus*, *Bifidobacterium Lactis* and *Bifidobacterium Bifidum* reported significantly greater improvement in the severity of their symptoms, fewer days of pain and improved quality of life compared with those who received a placebo.

Probiotic-rich foods like kefir have also been shown to be beneficial in treating yeast infections, infant colic, bad breath, hangovers, and Traveler's Diarrhea.

Drink up!

Design your ideal smoothie and find out your Kefir-ality [here](#)

Live in Chicago? Visit [Starfruit Café](#) for frozen kefir.