

Benefits of Homemade Yogurt Versus Commercial

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Beyond its healthy milk-derived nutrients, homemade yogurt is a fermented food that delivers the beneficial probiotics you need for optimal gut health
- › While yogurt is generally assumed to be a nutritious snack, you'd be wise to look beyond the packaging and perceptions to realize all yogurt is not created equal
- › Depending on the quality of the milk and the fermentation methods used, your body may receive several healthy benefits from eating yogurt, or possibly no benefits at all

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Yogurt has come a long way since it was presumably stumbled upon around 5,000 B.C., during the rise of animal domestication. A byproduct of fermented milk, yogurt is widely accepted to have Turkish roots and continues to be referred to by its Turkish name in languages around the world.¹

Because yogurt is a milk derivative, it contains many of the same beneficial nutrients as milk: calcium, phosphorus, potassium, riboflavin and vitamin A. Furthermore, in its traditional form, yogurt is a nutrient-dense food that is rich in high-quality protein, beneficial probiotics and cancer-fighting conjugated linoleic acid.

Today, the availability, convenience and healthy properties of yogurt appeal to people worldwide. Sales of yogurt in the U.S. are roughly \$8 billion annually, about half of which is attributed to Greek yogurt.²

As you may know, Greek or Greek-style yogurt is the result of a straining process that removes the liquid whey, resulting in a thicker, creamier yogurt. While it tastes similar to regular yogurt, Greek yogurt contains more calories, fat and protein.³

Although yogurt is generally assumed to be a nutritious snack, you'd be wise to look beyond the packaging and perceptions to uncover the facts. Many of the drinkable, spoonable and squeezable yogurt products that come in countless flavors and packages are not all they appear to be.

Most are loaded with added sugar, artificial ingredients and fillers. The majority contain only a marginal amount of probiotics. Sadly, the yogurt you are consuming from your local grocery store may not be benefiting your health as much as you think.

What You Should Know About Store-Bought Yogurt

A number of variables affect the quality of the commercially produced yogurt you buy from the store. Depending on the quality of the milk and the methods used to transform it into yogurt, your body may receive several healthy benefits or possibly no benefits at all.

High-quality yogurt contains scores of beneficial bacteria that boost your gut health. The problem is that most store-bought varieties miss the quality mark for three main reasons.⁴ First, poor-quality milk is used to produce most commercial yogurts. In the U.S. that means milk from Holsteins typically raised on [concentrated animal feeding operations](#) (CAFOs).

Holsteins have been genetically bred since the 1940s to produce increasingly higher quantities of milk.⁵ Holsteins generate about 28% of the U.S. milk supply annually.⁶

Notably, milk from Holsteins has the lowest fat and protein content as compared to that from other breeds like Brown Swiss, Guernsey and Jersey cows.⁷ Lower fat content detracts from the creaminess and consistency of yogurt.

Second, while many store-bought yogurts masquerade as health food, they actually contain artificial colors, flavors and sweeteners (including artificial sweeteners), as well as thickeners such as pectin. Ideally, "good yogurt" should contain only full-fat, grass fed **raw milk** and live probiotic cultures.

The sugar content of store-bought yogurt is another top concern. I use the term "sugar" lightly because, very often, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are used to sweeten yogurt. This includes genetically engineered (GE) beet sugar and corn syrup (**high-fructose corn syrup**).

Because sugar feeds the disease-causing microbes that crowd out the beneficial flora in your intestinal tract, the most important step in building healthy gut flora is to limit your sugar intake. The negative effects from sugar far outweigh the minimal probiotic benefits you may receive from store-bought yogurt.

Third, unless the yogurt you buy is organic and made from milk provided by grass fed cows, you are very likely ingesting yogurt laced with GE corn and/or soy. As you probably know, more than 90% of the world's supply of corn and soy is GE, and most U.S. dairy cows eat a GMO-based diet.

Why Not Make Your Own High-Quality Yogurt at Home?

Perhaps you haven't considered making your own yogurt. It may be that you do not realize how easy it is to do. All you need is a high-quality starter culture and raw, grass fed milk. There are plenty of excellent starter cultures available.

Whatever you choose, be sure you don't use sweetened commercial yogurt as your source of the starter culture! It contains too much sugar and not enough live cultures to be effective. At its most basic level, adding the starter culture to the milk and letting it sit overnight at room temperature is all that's needed to turn the milk into yogurt.

Because the cultures are temperature-sensitive, the only trick to making good yogurt is keeping the milk/culture starter mixture at a consistently warm temperature until it has had enough time to ferment.⁸

It may take a few tries to arrive at your desired consistency and preferred taste. For example, if you end up with kefir the next morning, simply let the mixture ferment a few hours longer. Once it thickens to the consistency of yogurt, you can store it in the refrigerator until you are ready to eat it.

Gently Heating the Milk Will Produce a Thicker Yogurt

Yogurt-making aficionados assert that heating the milk ensures a more consistent outcome and thicker yogurt. The only equipment you will need is a heavy-bottomed pot, a spoon and a thermometer, as well as the following step-by-step instructions:⁹

1. Place the desired amount of milk in the pot.
2. Heat the milk gently to about 109 degrees Fahrenheit, or 43 degrees Celsius (this ensures you to retain the milk's natural bacteria).
3. Measure and add the starter culture when the milk reaches the correct temperature.
4. Mix thoroughly.
5. Preheat a large, heat-resistant glass jar by pouring boiling water into it.
6. Pour out the boiling water.
7. Add the milk mixture to the jar.
8. Secure a lid on the jar to prevent heat loss.
9. Keep the jar warm for at least six to eight hours, or longer, to activate the cultures.
10. Place your finished yogurt in the refrigerator for five to six hours or until it becomes firm.

A few additional tips to consider:^{10,11}

- Take care when heating the milk because overheating not only kills the live cultures already present in the milk, but can hamper fermentation
- Wrap a couple of thick towels around the jar and place it in an insulated cooler to keep the mixture warm and help activate the cultures
- Once fermented to your desired consistency, homemade yogurt should be stored in the refrigerator where it will keep for five to seven days
- If you make a new batch of yogurt within seven days, you can forego using starter culture by adding a few tablespoons of your finished product to the milk for the new yogurt

You Control the Ingredients With Homemade Yogurt

While homemade yogurt may be thinner than store-bought yogurt, the taste will be similar or better, and you'll have total control over the ingredients. If the natural flavor of homemade yogurt is a bit too strong for your liking, you can easily sweeten it with whole-food sweeteners.

According to your taste, you may add fresh berries, a squirt of your favorite citrus juice, a pinch of [stevia](#) or a little vanilla extract. Dried, unsweetened coconut is another option for adding flavor. To make savory dips and dressings, try adding dill, garlic or other spices to your yogurt. While on assignment overseas, San Francisco-based food writer Nicole Spiridakis shared her perspective on why it's worthwhile to make your own yogurt:¹²

"When it comes to dairy, I like my milk organic and my yogurt unsweetened. I was surprised in my initial ... grocery forays to discover that most of the yogurt was flavored and a bit overladen with sweeteners for my taste. I am rather boring in my yogurt preferences: plain, please, with no sugar added ...

I experimented with making homemade yogurt years ago, as much for the scientific fun of it as for the finished product. But I'd nearly forgotten about

those efforts since yogurt is easily accessible ... and comes in as many flavors and varieties as you could wish for.

... The feeling of satisfaction from making something yourself is worth the effort. Besides, it's not as if making yogurt from scratch is difficult – it's actually incredibly easy, almost laughably so. For control freaks like me, the ability to know exactly what's going into it is another bonus.

Stir in a bit of fruit, honey or maple syrup if you like a touch of sweetness or leave it completely untouched. What I love about this method is that I get to decide exactly what goes into it ... The options are endless."

Once you get the hang of it, incorporating homemade yogurt into your diet will help you realize the many benefits attributed to fermented foods. When yogurt and other cultured products become a regular part of your diet, you will give your digestive tract the beneficial bacteria it needs to function properly.

The Importance of Using Raw Organic, Grass Fed Milk

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of using raw, organic milk from grass fed cows for your yogurt. While nearly every public-health "expert" suggests milk must be pasteurized to ensure safe consumption, it's important to remember that raw milk was consumed for millennia prior to the invention of pasteurization. Compared to pasteurized commercial varieties, raw milk yogurt is also very thick and creamy.

In my opinion, pasteurization is only needed for milk produced by cows raised in poor conditions like CAFOs, where the animals are crowded, kept in unsanitary conditions and fed a disease-promoting, unnatural diet. As such, be sure to use raw, grass fed milk when making yogurt, sourced from a high-quality, ideally local and organic, farm.

You can locate a raw milk source near you through the Weston A. Price Foundation's Raw Milk Finder.¹³ High-quality raw milk contains many health benefits, such as:

- "Good" bacteria that line and protect your gastrointestinal tract

- Beneficial amino acids, proteins and omega-3 fats
- More than 60 digestive enzymes that make raw milk very digestible (these enzymes are destroyed in milk that is pasteurized, making it harder for your body to process pasteurized milk)
- Healthy unoxidized cholesterol

You can easily ascertain the quality of grass fed milk and yogurt by its color. The carotenoids in the plants cows eat on pasture give grass fed products a more yellow-orange cast. When cows are raised on dried grass or hay, the product will be whiter due to a reduced carotenoid and antioxidant content.

What You Need to Know About Starter Cultures and Fermentation

A yogurt starter culture is simply a blend of bacteria whose No. 1 job is to consume lactose. When a starter culture is added to milk, it converts lactose to lactic acid, a process that contributes to yogurt's refreshingly tangy taste. Longer fermentation times result in tarter flavors. Starter cultures are available in either direct-set or heirloom varieties, as detailed below:¹⁴

- Direct-set cultures, also known as single-use cultures, are added to milk to produce a single batch of yogurt
- Heirloom starters are reusable, which means they can be propagated indefinitely by mixing some of the yogurt from the last batch into the milk for the new batch, generally within seven days to retain the strength of the bacteria

In addition to propagation, temperature is another important factor to consider when fermenting yogurt. There are two culture types that are based on the most desirable temperature ranges at which they produce yogurt: mesophilic and thermophilic.¹⁵

Mesophilic cultures work well at room temperature (70 to 77 degrees Fahrenheit, or 21 to 25 degrees Celsius). There is no need to preheat the milk when using a mesophilic culture. Instead, you simply mix the starter into cold milk and maintain the mixture at

room temperature for about 12 to 18 hours, or until it achieves your desired consistency. Mesophilic cultures typically produce yogurt of a thinner consistency than that which is produced when using heated milk.

Thermophilic cultures are added to heated milk and tolerate shorter fermentation time frames. Due to the heated milk, thermophilic cultures typically produce a thicker yogurt that is ready after just five to 12 hours, or longer if you desire. The trick to proper fermentation with this type of starter culture is to maintain a consistently warm temperature for several hours. For this reason, some choose to use a yogurt maker, while others have had success using a slow cooker.

Take a Closer Look at the Yogurt in Your Fridge

Regardless of whether you choose to experiment with making homemade yogurt, I hope you will take a closer look at the ingredient labels on the yogurt products you may be bringing home from the grocery store. If you are not able to find a high-quality, grass fed organic brand, talk to the store manager to see if they may consider stocking one. If you want to know which commercial yogurts are healthy and which are not, refer to The Cornucopia Institute's Yogurt Report.¹⁶

Another source for high-quality organic yogurt is your local health food store. Most health food stores carry at least one or two such brands. They also carry starter cultures, or you can easily find and order one online.

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