

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Edwin Lau

## Yogurt: Miracle Food or Commercial Hype?

*Nutrition is a cornerstone of the chiropractic lifestyle. That's why Dr. Lau educates patients about wellness-focused eating — and helps them distinguish nutrition facts from nutrition trends.*

*Lately, yogurt advertisements have been extolling a variety of virtues for this staple dairy food, and patients have become more curious about its possible health benefits. Is it just marketing hype, or does yogurt deserve the special attention? Let's find out.*

### How Is Yogurt Created?

When live bacteria are added to milk, it ferments the natural milk sugar (lactose). This chemical reaction produces lactic acid, which interacts with milk protein, and thickens it into yogurt.

Yogurt contains active cultures, which have complicated-sounding names like *Streptococcus salivarius subsp. thermophilus* and *Lactobacillus delbrueckii subsp. bulgaricus*. These are supplemented with lactic acid bacteria, including *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, *Lactobacillus casei* and *Bifidobacterium*, all of which improve the taste of yogurt.

Flavorings and other additives may also be part of the recipe — some of which offer health benefits, and some of which may contain components that are destructive to well-being.



### Ancient Health Food

People have been making and eating yogurt for more than 4,000 years. With its high calcium and protein content, yogurt is considered a staple food in many parts of the world, from Asia to Eastern Europe, and it is often associated with longevity.

### The Health Benefits of Yogurt's Good Bacteria

Aside from its basic nutrients, what makes yogurt such a wholesome food? The lactic acid, which prevents the formation of "bad" bacteria, also preserves the "good" bacteria in yogurt. Dr. Lau wants patients to know that "good bacteria," called probiotics, have myriad benefits.

In 2006, a scientific analysis of probiotics, defined as nondigestible, lactic acid-producing bacteria like those in yogurt, showed that they boost intestinal health, enhance the immune system, improve the bioavailability of nutrients, reduce symptoms of lactose intolerance, decrease allergies and lower the risk of certain kinds of cancer (*J Appl Microbiol* 2006;100:1171-85). That's an impressive list of advantages for such a humble food.

### Gastrointestinal Benefits

The correct balance of good and bad



bacteria in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract keeps the immune system operating at top capacity.

Yogurt has long been known to be advantageous for gastrointestinal health. According to scientists, consumption of the bacteria contained in yogurt lowers the risk of contracting stomach infection in the lower GI tract (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2000;71(6 Suppl):1682S-7S).

For individuals with severe stomach problems, yogurt can be much more than a tasty between-meal snack. A new Canadian study tested the effects of regular yogurt consumption in patients diagnosed with either inflammatory bowel disease or Crohn's disease. Researchers determined that eating probiotic yogurt for one month provided significant anti-inflammatory properties for those patients (*Clin Exp Immunol* 2007;149:470-9).

### Can Yogurt Boost Longevity?

A classic ad campaign for a popular brand of yogurt depicted happy, elderly folks joyfully consuming yogurt. The ads inferred that yogurt was responsible for the spring in their step as well as their overall fitness. In fact, there is some truth in that. A recent study looked at the health habits of Polish people who've lived to be at least 100 years old and found that yogurt is one of their main foods (*Rocz Panstw Zakl Hig* 2007;58:279-86).

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## **Beware of Yogurt's Manufacturing Process**

A general rule of eating for health maintains that the less a food is altered, the more nutritious it is. This principle is definitely true for yogurt.

There are striking differences in the nutritional values of yogurt products. Plain yogurt contains only live cultures and milk, and it is high in the essential nutrient calcium.

In fact, yogurt is often recommended for people who require a high calcium intake, such as pregnant women. Expectant mothers are often recommended three to four servings a day of milk-based products in order to glean adequate calcium for their developing babies (*Ther Umsch* 2007;64:243-7). Yogurt is also a terrific calcium source for growing kids.

But the manufacturing process, including pasteurization, can affect yogurt's nutrition value. Pasteurization heats a food product long enough to destroy disease-causing bacteria.

Heat-treating can lengthen yogurt's shelf life and make its consistency more pudding-like. However, this process also destroys healthy, probiotic bacteria.

Yogurt containing active cultures also aids digestion for people who are considered lactose-intolerant. Unfortunately, pasteurization eliminates the enhanced digestion of lactose that is one of yogurt's primary benefits, and kills helpful live cultures (*Am J Clin Nutr* 1989;49:823-7).

The body will absorb and use much more calcium from fresh yogurt than from any pasteurized or heat-treated variety (*J Am Coll Nutr* 2007;26:288-94). To glean the most calcium from yogurt, look for a brand containing around 35 percent of the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of calcium.

## **Beware of Additives in Yogurt**

There is an immense array of yogurt

products available: yogurt in single-serving cups, yogurt in child-friendly tubes and even drinkable yogurt.

Consumers need to be on the lookout for yogurt with unhealthy additives, especially sugar and artificial flavors. Milk naturally contains sugar as lactose. When you look at the nutritional facts panel for a yogurt product, lactose content will be listed as sugar, and that's OK. Naturally occurring lactose is processed by the body differently than table sugar, or sucrose. The trouble comes when you choose yogurt with a lot of added sugar. Investigate the ingredients lists, and avoid varieties sweetened with anything other than whole fruit or honey. Also avoid varieties with artificial flavorings, preservatives, artificial sweeteners and other chemical additives.

While there is no RDA for sugar, the U.S. government officially advises us to consume no more than 40 grams (10 teaspoons) of sugar per 2,000 calories. A quick label check at the grocery store reveals that many yogurts contain 30 to 40 grams of sugar in one single serving!

It's important to confirm that the calories in your yogurt come from the yogurt itself and not from sugar, or worse, from high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS). The consumption of HFCS increased more than 1,000 percent from 1970 to 1990. Today, HFCS accounts for more than 40 percent of all caloric sugars (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2004;79:537-43). A high intake of HFCS is linked with a variety of disease processes, especially in children.

## **A Nondairy Option: Soy Yogurt**

People who choose to avoid dairy products should consider soy yogurt.

Soybeans contain organic compounds called isoflavones, which are phytoestrogens (natural plant-based estrogens) thought to have many disease-busting properties. For instance, a diet rich in isoflavones may prevent several types of cancer.

In animal studies, scientists found that isoflavone-supplemented yogurt prevents loss of bone mass and can even bolster bone mass when resistive exercise is added (*Maturitas* 2007;57:261-70).

The combination of soy isoflavone consumption and exercise has also been shown to prevent body fat accumulation. This was proven by another animal study focused on the estrogen-like qualities of soy isoflavones (*Metabolism* 2004;53:942-8).

## **What Is Kefir?**

Tired of yogurt? Try kefir. Kefir is a fermented milk product, similar to yogurt but more liquid in consistency. It often contains more bioavailable "good" bacteria than yogurt products, and is beneficial for those with lactose intolerance or digestive problems.

Kefir is sour, and may be made more palatable by blending with fruit, honey or molasses.

## **Yogurt: More Than Just Hype**

Bottom line: Yogurt is more than hype. It does indeed have powerful health benefits — *if you read labels carefully*. Try to choose yogurt that is minimally processed and contains a minimum of ingredients. Do so and you just might find a nutritious new snack that satisfies your hunger, and improves your health.



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