

ORGANIC SEPTEMBER

# 10 of the best FERMENTED FOODS

A healthy gut can transform your health and energy levels. Dr Justine Butler, head of research at Viva!, tells us which foods to prioritise

Viva! Health is part of the charity Viva!, Europe's largest vegan campaign group. They monitor scientific research linking diet to health and provide accurate information on which you can make informed choices about the food you eat. [viva.org.uk/health](http://viva.org.uk/health)

Dating back around 9,000 years, the process of fermentation was originally used to preserve foods for times of scarcity. Today, fermented foods are known for their health benefits – they can be rich in probiotics and nutrients that support gut health, immunity and overall wellbeing.

When microbes such as bacteria and yeast are added to food or drink, they convert sugars into energy and by-products such as ethanol, carbon dioxide and organic acids. These changes help preserve the food by preventing the growth of other, harmful microbes. Some fermented foods, but not all, contain probiotics – living microbes.

Evidence for the health benefits of fermented foods is growing – they may be easier to digest, offer more absorbable nutrients and can be richer in vitamins, antioxidants and bioactive peptides. Fermented foods also support a healthy microbiome, benefiting both physical and mental health. More research is needed, but further benefits are likely to be discovered in the next few years.

Globally, over 5,000 fermented foods exist. Here are 10 of the best vegan options and their key benefits...



## 1 TEMPEH

Originally from Indonesia, tempeh is made by fermenting pre-soaked soya beans with the fungus *Rhizopus* to form a firm cake. It has a nutty, mushroom-like flavour and works well in stir-fries, stews, sandwiches or as a bacon substitute.

Easier to digest than tofu, tempeh is high in fibre, B vitamins, iron, calcium and protein and, because it's made from soya, it contains all the essential amino acids. Though cooking kills probiotics, it remains rich in prebiotic fibre that supports gut health. Its soya isoflavones may help lower cholesterol, reduce inflammation and combat free radical damage.

It's worth noting that those with thyroid issues should limit their intake.

## 2 VEGAN LIVE YOGHURT

Vegan yoghurt is made by fermenting plant-based milks with live cultures, such as *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*. It has a tangy flavour and offers probiotic benefits.

When fortified, it can be a good source of calcium, vitamins D and B12 and is often lower in fat and sugar than dairy yoghurt. For the healthiest option, choose varieties with minimal added sugar and ingredients.

Vegan yoghurt also has a lower environmental impact and is free from lactose.



24

VEGANFOODANDLIVING.COM

### 3 SAUERKRAUT

Translated from German as 'sour cabbage', sauerkraut is finely shredded cabbage fermented with salt. Commonly used on Reuben sandwiches and hot dogs, it also pairs well with vegan sausages, burgers, baked potatoes, salads and more.

Low in calories and fat, sauerkraut is rich in vitamins C and K, iron, folate and fibre. Live sauerkraut contains probiotics that support gut health, immunity and may benefit heart and bone health.

However, it can be high in salt so limit your intake if you have high blood pressure. Sauerkraut, aged cheeses and cured meats should all be avoided by people taking MAOIs (antidepressant medication) as they can interact with the drugs, leading to a dangerous increase in blood pressure. Unpasteurised sauerkraut is not recommended for pregnant or immunocompromised individuals.

### 4 KIMCHI

This spicy, fermented Korean vegetable mix is usually made with cabbage and radish, but it sometimes contains fish sauce so be sure to check the label. Originating in Korea over 1,000 years ago, it's a hot, sour and salty condiment that adds a burst of flavour to burgers, sandwiches, soups and stir-fries. It's also great with noodles and savoury pancakes.

Rich in vitamins A, C and K, plus iron, calcium, magnesium, potassium and fibre, kimchi also contains probiotics that support gut health and may ease bloating and digestive issues. It may also help lower cholesterol, regulate blood sugar, support brain and skin health and reduce cancer risk through its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects.

Like sauerkraut, Kimchi is also high in salt and can pose a food poisoning risk if not prepared or stored properly, especially in immunocompromised individuals.



### 5 VEGAN KEFIR

Traditional kefir is a fermented dairy milk drink that's rich in probiotics, but now dairy-free versions are available, such as coconut milk kefir made with vegan cultures. Kefir can be used in smoothies, poured over granola, as a cream substitute for desserts or just as a drink.

Some research suggests vegan kefir may support gut health, healthy weight, diabetes management and also help reduce inflammation.

### 6 FERMENTED VEGAN CHEESE

Fermented nut-based cheeses are produced using cultures and methods similar to dairy cheese, but are easier to digest and have a much lower environmental impact. They are lactose-free and can taste surprisingly like the real thing, but without the cruelty of dairy farming.

They offer healthy fats, plant proteins, fibre and probiotics that support gut health, digestion and immunity. Fermentation also helps to boost nutrient absorption.



### 7 MISO

Though a Japanese staple, miso originated from ancient China. The thick paste is made by fermenting soya beans with salt and koji – a culture of rice or barley fermented with the fungus *Aspergillus oryzae*. The longer the fermentation, the darker it becomes and the stronger the flavour.

With a rich umami taste, miso goes well in soups, sauces and marinades. Low in fat and high in protein, B vitamins, vitamin K, minerals and antioxidants, its probiotics support gut health, digestion and immunity. Use in moderation if you're watching your blood pressure, though research suggests its salt may affect the body differently than table salt.

### 8 SOURDOUGH BREAD

This kind of bread is naturally leavened with a fermented starter of flour and water, using wild yeasts and bacteria to make the dough rise. Although baking kills the bacteria, sourdough still contains prebiotic fibre and polyphenols that support gut health.

Sourdough is a good source of antioxidants, folic acid and iron and contains some magnesium and potassium. Fermentation makes it easier to digest than other breads and increases the bioavailability of its minerals. It also has a lower glycaemic index than other breads, which is beneficial for blood sugar levels and may help reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes. It's not suitable for those with coeliac disease.

### 9 FERMENTED PICKLED VEGETABLES

These are made using beneficial bacteria to turn vegetable sugars into lactic acid, creating a tangy flavour while preserving the food.

You can ferment many vegetables, such as cucumbers, carrots, radishes and green beans – enjoy them in grain bowls, falafel or with a burger! Most supermarket pickles are vinegar-based and lack probiotics, so look for refrigerated pickles labelled 'live cultures' or 'probiotic' for real fermentation benefits.

Fermented vegetables can boost gut health, immunity and nutrient absorption, but unpasteurised fermented foods can still carry food-borne risks so discard any that smell bad, taste off or are slimy.

### 10 KOMBUCHA

Kombucha is a lightly carbonated drink made by fermenting sweet tea with a SCOBY (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast).

Originating over 2,000 years ago in Northeast China, it's rich in probiotics and antioxidants that may aid digestion, support immunity and help reduce inflammation in the body.

Shop-bought versions can be high in sugar or sweeteners so always check the label. ❤️

