

# DON'T BE FOOLED

## BY KOMBUCHA WANNABES

Not all kombucha is created equal, so if you drink this probiotic-rich drink, make sure you're actually getting what you're paying for, writes dietitian *Ashleigh Feltham*.



**T**he life-enhancing power of a healthy gut has become mainstream media fodder, and in tandem with this, previously obscure foodstuffs that boast probiotic, or 'good bacteria', credentials have also become supermarket staples.

Of the many foods and drinks promising to facilitate a healthy balance of good and bad bacteria in the gut, kombucha is perhaps the poster child.

Unfortunately, some varieties contain the same, or lower, levels of probiotics than you'd find in a glass of tap water. A number of factors determine the health benefits of kombucha, so before you chuck out the pack you've just bought, let's identify what kombucha is and how to choose the best variety to give your body the most potential health benefits.

Kombucha is a drink that has been around for centuries and is made by mixing a combination of green or black tea with sugar and then adding both yeast and probiotic bacteria. The drink is then left for 7 to 10 days to allow several reactions to take place. The reactions made by the bacteria create the distinctive tang taste while the yeast creates the drink's sparkling effervescence.

The research supporting the health benefits of kombucha is currently limited to mostly animal studies and cell cultures. Although the evidence of benefits to humans

is yet to be strongly established, studies have shown that potential health benefits may include:

- antioxidant and polyphenol benefits to help reduce the effects of free radical damage linked to disease, illness and ageing
- potential antimicrobial effects on the bad bacteria which can cause illness or stomach ulcers
- anti-cancerous effects by stopping a component needed for cancer growth
- assisting the maintenance of healthy blood sugar levels
- helping increase levels of 'good' HDL cholesterol and decrease 'bad' LDL cholesterol.

Additionally, kombucha contains several B vitamins which are needed to help convert food into energy, and vitamin C for immunity, as well as a component for making collagen, which is linked to healthy and youthful skin. It also contains several minerals and organic acids, which are especially helpful for vegetarians because they help release iron and zinc from plant foods. Kombucha also boasts a few amino acids which are needed to help make protein and cells in the body.

While many choose to make their own kombucha, more of us are also buying the commercially available bottled options. However, as with any product, not all varieties are of equal quality, or benefit.

Be sure to tick off this checklist when making your choice:

**Is the kombucha in the fridge?** The bacteria and yeast in the drink will die if not kept in a cool environment, so if you are selecting the ones from the long-life section at the shops, you are buying dead probiotics.

**How probiotic-rich is it really?** The number of probiotics needed for a beneficial effect in your body is around 1 billion plus, so check the label. Variety of probiotics is an additional factor; try to select a drink with more than one type of probiotic if possible.

**Is the drink made from an extract or from the reaction of the bacteria and yeast to the tea and sugar drink?** It should claim this on the bottle; if not, check the website.

**What type of probiotic is in the kombucha?** If you do a little research, you can see the types of probiotics which are recommended for health benefits, such as *Bacillus Coagulans GBI-30 608*

**Is the tea mixed with sugar or with an artificial sweetener?** For the fermentation to take place properly the drink needs to have sugar added for the bacteria and yeast to react with.

**Is the alcohol content mentioned?** During the reaction there should be a small amount of alcohol present, and this should be listed in the ingredients.

**Does the brand of kombucha claim to cure everything under the sun?** If the claims on the bottle seem too good to be true, they probably are, and it would be a good idea to keep walking to the next brand.

**Take home message:** Not all kombucha varieties are equal, so if you enjoy this trendy beverage make sure you are also receiving the potential health benefits. If your current brand is merely a wannabe kombucha, it may be cheaper to simply choose a sparkling mineral water. **N**

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