

The kombucha conundrum

The gone-viral tea is OK for most to try, but do your research first

The latest do-it-yourself health-improving drink to take social media by storm: kombucha. Celebrities are trying it, and [new research](#) claims the tangy tea can mimic the effects of fasting, helping with weight loss.

While experts say the drink is fine for most to try, you should keep a couple things in mind. One, the jury is still out on the extent of the benefits. And two, it's crucial to make the drink the right way.

"It's not inherently unsafe to drink," says Lexi Fitzgerald, a clinical dietitian who sees patients at OSF HealthCare. "It's just all about making sure you read nutrition facts and do your research to assess how it affects you."

Kombucha basics

Fitzgerald says kombucha (pronounced com-BOO-chah) is made of tea, sugar, bacteria and yeast. The bacteria and yeast combine to form a culture. Add tea and sugar, then let the concoction ferment for a week to a month.

Fitzgerald says kombucha advocates claim the drink has similar benefits to other fermented foods that have probiotics like sauerkraut, pickles and yogurt. A probiotic is a healthy bacterium that supports gut health.

"It's touted to help alleviate constipation or support a healthy immune system," Fitzgerald says. "But there's not a ton of substantial research to back that up quite yet."

On weight loss: Fitzgerald says kombucha isn't a "magic potion" that will cause you to shed pounds. An *overall* plan of diet and exercise is the way. She says you *can* use kombucha in place of sugar-sweetened drinks, but look at the label for high levels of added sugar. That brings a higher risk for diabetes and heart disease.

Dos and don'ts

Other things on the checklist to do kombucha right:

- Don't drink it in excess, especially if you have preexisting gastrointestinal issues. Start with a small amount like 4 ounces. Look at the label to see how many serving sizes are in one bottle.

"Your belly might feel a little funky," if you drink too much, Fitzgerald says. "Diarrhea and gastrointestinal distress can happen."

- Fitzgerald calls making kombucha at home a "tricky process" and recommends you purchase it from a trusted source instead.

If you *do* make the drink at home, start with a recipe from a good source like a university, hospital, doctor or dietitian. Use recipes from blogs or hand-me-down index cards with caution. Talk to one of those trusted sources to make sure the recipe is legitimate.

Next, keep your space, tools and body clean.

"If there are unsafe or unclean conditions, bad bacteria can grow. That can lead to illness," Fitzgerald says.

- Make and store the drink in glass containers. Fitzgerald says clay containers can lead to lead poisoning.
- People who Fitzgerald says should stay away from kombucha due to the bacteria involved: young children, pregnant women and people with a weakened immune system, such as people getting cancer treatment. She also says there is a small amount of alcohol in the drink due to the fermentation, but it's not enough to label it as an alcoholic beverage.

Learn more

Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for healthy recipes.