Basic Water Kefir Instructions

For a 4 cup batch you’ll need:

1/2 gallon canning jar (you must use a glass or ceramic container; airtight is best. It must be large enough for several inches of headroom)
1/4 - 1/3 cup (re-hydrated) water kefir grains
4 cups filtered or spring water (chlorine and chloramine will kill the grains; don’t use treated water)
2 heaping tablespoons sugar (white, brown, raw, rapadura, etc; don’t use honey. Honey is anti-microbial and is bad for the grains. Per Laureen Hudson molasses gives a deep, beery sort of flavour and works well, especially with ginger.)
1/2 lemon (scrub well before cutting in half)
dried, unsulfured fruit (a tablespoon of raisins, a couple prunes or apricots or other dried fruit)
a pinch each of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) and bone meal powder (or other powdered calcium – eggshell, crushed calcium tablet, powdered calcium supplement, or a 1” square piece of seaweed like kombu or wakame)
1-2 quart jars or bottles to put the finished kefir in

Add the water, sugar, baking soda, and bone meal to your jar. Stir gently. The bone meal powder will float; that’s fine. Add the kefir grains and fruit; don’t squeeze the lemon. Cover tightly and leave at room temperature for 1-3 days until the water is fizzy and tasty. (Shorter times in warmer weather, longer times in colder weather. One of the things I like about water kefir is that I can continue to ferment it in my cold house in the winter, when the kitchen temperature runs in the 40s-50sF; kombucha won’t ferment when it’s that cold, but water kefir keeps burbling happily along at a slower pace.)

Use a stainless steel or plastic strainer to strain the finished kefir. I strain into a 4 cup measuring cup then pour into one or two quart jars or bottles; you could also use a funnel to pour directly into the jars. Don’t squeeze the kefir grains through cloth or anything like that; just pour into a strainer. Pick the fruit out from the kefir grains. You’ll have three things now: water kefir, kefir grains, and fruit. Squeeze the juice from the lemon into the finished kefir.

The kefirred dried fruit is filled with probiotic-y goodness and very yummy, and the lemon peel is a tasty replacement for middle eastern pickled lemon in recipes (although you’ll need to increase salt in the recipe to make up for what would have been in the pickled lemon).

While many people don’t, I rinse the grains between each batch by gently running cool filtered/spring water over them. My crystals seem to multiply faster when I rinse them.

Once my grains have expanded to ½ cup or more, I make 6 cup batches rather than 4 cup batches; I use 3 heaping tablespoons sugar, a bit more fruit, and a larger pinch of baking soda and bone meal powder for the 6 cup batch.

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- 1 -
Recipes/Variations

Ginger Kefir
To the initial ferment add a 1-2” chunk of ginger root that’s been scrubbed and thinly sliced. You can use chopped or grated ginger, but it’s a bear to get all the bits out of the grains afterwards. Slices are much easier to pick out. You can also use ginger juice: puree the ginger in a blender with as much water as you need to process it. Process until very well pureed. Strain and use the juice in place of some of the water when you start the kefir and discard the solids (or use them for cooking). You can also do larger batches of ginger and freeze in whatever amounts you like.

Dried Fruit Variations
To me raisins give a rather champagne-y flavour. Prunes gives a darker and richer flavour – and fizzy fermented prunes are VERY yummy eating. Figs are somewhere in between, but I don’t care for them as much. Apricots give a rich flavour that’s lighter than the prunes but richer than grapes. Dried apple gives a wonderful cider-y note. I’ve only used unsulfured fruits and recommend it.

Frozen Fruit Variation
When I’ve run out of raisins before, I’ve added ½ cup of frozen blueberries or raspberries instead. They both came out delicious, with a hint of the berry flavour. The grains turned mauve with the blueberries and bright pink with the raspberries, but within an hour of being in a fresh batch of water kefir with raisins again, they were back to the original colour.

Tea Variation
Use brewed and cooled herbal or green tea in place of water.

Juice Variation
Use 1 part fruit juice to 1-3 parts water for the initial fermentation. Apple, grape, berry, and blended juices have worked well for me. Orange juice was a failure. Coconut water was lovely; I use undiluted coconut water. I’ve only used fresh or frozen juices, but per Cyndi Norwitz bottled juices also work.

Important Note:
I’ve found that it’s best to use my excess grains for variations like tea and juice (and any other experimentation), just in case the grains aren’t happy in the mix.
How to Re-hydrate Dried Water Kefir Grains

I send out about 1.5 tablespoons dried grains. To re-hydrate dried grains use 1 qt water and 1-3 tablespoons sugar; let ferment 1-3 days. Drain the grains and discard the water or use it as greywater. You should have between ¼ and 1/3 cup of grains once they’re re-hydrated.

Then you can use the basic water kefir instructions.

How to Store Excess Water Kefir Grains

When your grains have expanded to 1 cup or more, you can divide them; put ½-1 cup in a pint jar with a spoonful of sugar and fill the jar with water. They will keep well in the icebox for several months if you replace the sugar water monthly.

You can dehydrate the grains using very low heat (under 100F) until they’re hard and dry, then store them in an airtight container in the freezer. They’re easiest to mail safely if they’re dehydrated.

I’ve not tried it, but I’ve been told you can also freeze excess grains in a zipper bag or other container; they’re supposed to last at least a year frozen.

Secondary Fermentation

After you’ve strained off the finished water kefir, you may enjoy doing a secondary fermentation with added fruit juice. Add ¼ to 1 cup juice to 3 cups finished water kefir, close tightly, and leave at room temperature for 12-24 hours, then refrigerate. Don’t leave it out longer, especially in hot weather, because the pressure can build up too high.

Note: secondary fermentation increases the alcohol content, but even secondary fermentation will cause only fairly low levels of alcohol. If you’re sensitive to alcohol or simply want to avoid higher alcohol levels, ferment for a shorter time with less sugar. More sugar -> more alcohol.

Variations:
You can use ¼ cup frozen juice concentrate; all the flavours I’ve tried worked well (I didn’t try orange juice due to my earlier failure with it).

Mint lemonade is wonderful: I add the juice of one lemon, a little sugar, and several crushed mint leaves.

I like grape lemonade, too: ¼ cup frozen or 1 cup fresh grape juice and the juice of one lemon.

And raspberry lemonade: 1 cup frozen raspberries, the juice of one lemon, and a small spoonful of sugar.
Miscellaneous Notes

I’ve seen the “don’t use anything metal” rule, but I’ve always used a stainless steel mesh strainer on my grains as that’s what I have. It doesn’t seem to have done them any harm. Laureen Hudson uses a silicon steamer basket, because her metal strainer seems to break the grains up more.

Don’t overfill your bottles and jars. CO2 builds up during the fermentation and having plenty of headroom for the gas prevents breakage.

Cyndi Norwitz has used lime in place of lemon in the primary fermentation and it works well.

I’ve added significantly more prunes to batches (a dozen or so) just to have lots of fizzy fermented prunes to eat. The kefir was fine but the grains didn’t multiply as much as usual.

My grains are grown in well water with organic sugar and organic fruits.

You can use from 2–4 tablespoons of sugar in a 4 cup/1 quart batch. I use 2 heaping spoonfuls and enjoy it, but many recipes call for 4 and come out nicely, too. More sugar will lead to a higher alcohol content. (But in primary fermentation the amount will still be very low.)

Once in a while my water kefir feels “thick” – when that happens I leave out the minerals for a batch or two.

You’re welcome to contact me with questions or comments – and if you have recipes you’d like to share with others via this document, let me know. I’ll test them and add them in with credit.

~Carys