

## Mongolians, and their gut bacteria, may be the key to solving lactose intolerance

[Archaeogeneticist Christina] Warinner was there to solve a mystery: Despite the [dairy](#) diversity she saw, an estimated 95 percent of Mongolians are, genetically speaking, lactose intolerant. Yet, in the frost-free summer months, she believes they may be getting up to half their calories from milk products.

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Mongolians are surrounded by microscopic organisms: the bacteria that ferment the milk into their assorted foodstuffs, the microbes in their guts and on the dairy-soaked felt of their yurts. The way these invisible creatures interact with each other, with the environment, and with our bodies creates a dynamic ecosystem.

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Warinner is convinced that the Mongolian affinity for dairy is made possible by a mastery of bacteria 3,000 years or more in the making. By scraping gunk off the teeth of steppe dwellers who died thousands of years ago, she's been able to prove that milk has held a prominent place in the Mongolian diet for millennia. Understanding the differences between traditional microbiomes like theirs and those prevalent in the industrialized world could help explain the illnesses that accompany modern lifestyles—and perhaps be the beginning of a different, more beneficial approach to diet and health.

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