Nutrition Questions?

Ask the Dietitian

Q: I keep hearing dairy is bad for me. Should I avoid it?

A: Milk and other dairy products are a great source of essential nutrients. Dairy provides us with energy as well as potassium, B vitamins, magnesium and protein. It's also a great source of calcium. Despite this, a large portion of the US population does not consume enough calcium, which is needed for healthy bones and teeth. This is particularly important during teenage years when we build 90% of our bone for use during adulthood. Think how important that is!

Calcium is abundant in dairy foods; it's as easy as 1-2-3 to meet your needs! Three to four servings of dairy each day provide enough calcium to meet daily recommendations (1). Most milk in the United States is also fortified with vitamin D, which helps calcium absorption for bone health (2).

So what is the big deal and why is dairy getting such a bad rap?
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—So what is the big deal and why is dairy getting such a bad rap?

--Does consumption of dairy foods cause weight gain? This is extremely controversial. However, the consensus is that there is no increase in body fat with dairy intake (2). Current evidence supports the recommendation to consume reduced fat or low-fat dairy foods for cardiovascular health (1).

--Is organic milk healthier than regular milk? There is no scientific evidence that organic dairy foods provide more nutrients than conventional dairy. Consuming organic foods might reduce exposure to pesticide residue and antibiotic-resistant bacteria (3). However, all milk in the United States is tested for the presence of antibiotics and must conform to FDA standards.

--Should you avoid dairy if you are lactose sensitive? If you are intolerant to lactose, you can choose lactose-free milk, but many people with intolerance are able to drink up to 1 glass of regular milk a day with no symptoms, especially if it is with a meal. Aged cheeses and yogurt with active cultures are also tolerated because they contain less lactose. These foods should be introduced slowly into your diet if you previously avoided them. Alternatives to dairy are calcium-fortified soy beverages or consumption of the enzyme lactase before consuming dairy (4).

--Do hormones in milk cause early puberty in females? There are natural hormones present in the milk that we drink, but the amount is minimal compared with human hormone levels during puberty. There is no evidence that this minimal amount has any effect on the early onset of puberty (4).

--Does flavored milk contain fewer nutrients than regular milk? Flavored milk delivers the same amount of calcium and other nutrients, but BE CAREFUL of the added sugar (5). It just adds empty calories. You should note that calcium is also available in non-dairy foods, but is present in smaller amounts and is not as easily absorbed by the body. Some foods, such as greens, that contain calcium also contain oxalate, which binds calcium in the gut and blocks its absorption. You would need to consume about five to six times as many servings of broccoli to get the same calcium as you do from just one serving of milk! So, dairy really is the best source of calcium. Check out http://myplate.gov/food-groups/dairy.html for more information on healthy eating.


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