Position Paper

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EDA POSITION ON SUGARS

MILK & DAIRY PRODUCTS ARE PART OF A HEALTHY, BALANCED DIET INCLUDING THOSE CONTAINING ADDED SUGAR

EDA follows a whole food approach: we eat whole foods, not single nutrients and, as such EDA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on sugars in the context of people’s overall diet, health and wellbeing.

- Milk and dairy products are an important part of a healthy diet and lifestyle
- Dairy is naturally nutrient-rich and provides many essential nutrients which contribute to good health at all stages of life
- Dairy contains naturally present sugars such as lactose and galactose. In the discussions around sugars it is important to distinguish between naturally present and added sugars
- In addition to their natural sugars content, some dairy products may contain added sugars. These products, though, are nutrient-rich and will make an important contribution to the diet’s nutritional adequacy
- It is key that consumers continue to be educated on the difference between nutrient-rich and nutrient-poor products that contain added sugars
- EDA remains committed to collaborate further on this issue with policy-makers, industry groups and stakeholders in a constructive way to help make a positive impact on overall health and accompany consumers in their aspiration to live healthier lifestyles

1. The importance of dairy products in a healthy diet and lifestyle

Milk, yoghurt and cheese are naturally nutrient-rich foods that provide many essential nutrients which contribute to good health at all stages of life. Milk is a natural source of calcium and vitamin B12, riboflavin (vitamin B2), phosphorus and potassium. It also contains smaller amounts of other nutrients including vitamin A, other B-vitamins, vitamin D, magnesium, iodine, selenium and zinc while containing relatively few calories. Dairy foods are also excellent sources of high quality protein which contain essential amino acids that the human body cannot synthesise itself. Milk and dairy foods are the main calcium providers in the European diet: dairy foods contribute on average to 60% of calcium intake.

Dairy is an important component of a healthy dietary pattern. The specific recommendations vary between countries, but on average, although serving sizes differs between countries, 2 to 3 servings of milk and dairy foods a day are recommended for adults; often more for children and adolescents, around 3 to 4 servings, and in some cases more for pregnant women and older people too.
Scientific studies show that as part of a healthy diet dairy foods contribute beneficially to bone health, management of body weight and composition and are associated with lower blood pressure and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

2. Milk sugars, a natural component of milk

When the term ‘sugar’ is used, we are often referring to ‘sucrose’ or table sugar. However, many other types of sugars are naturally present in many basic foods and consumed on a daily basis. These include glucose and fructose, which can be found in commonly-eaten foods such as fruits, sweeter vegetables and honey or lactose and galactose as naturally present sugars in dairy products. It may be noted that there is no evidence of adverse effect of consumption of sugars naturally present in milk and dairy food, as confirmed by WHO1.

3. Variety of dairy products to cater for every need

Despite its contribution to nutrient intake and status, dietary consumption data demonstrates that milk consumption, especially in children and adolescents, is steadily declining across the EU. A substantial proportion of the European population are failing to meet recommendations and guidelines for dairy intake, in particular adolescent girls, young women and frail elderly people. When milk is removed from the diet, it is often replaced by nutrient-poor, energy-dense foods and beverages; these products usually deliver a high calorie value per 100 grams, but no or only a few nutrients. Consuming dairy daily contributes to a better nutrient status and is an easy and enjoyable part of a healthy and balanced diet.

This is supported by research which indicates that despite a great and diverse food availability and adequate resources many Europeans have less than an optimal intake of certain nutrients, in particular calcium, selenium, iodine and vitamin D2. These nutrients are found in many dairy foods, and these inadequate nutrient intakes are likely to be partly a reflection of low dairy intakes. It is important to recognise that although obesity is on the rise in Europe, overweight people may also suffer from micronutrient deficiencies because they often consume nutritionally poor, unbalanced diets.

To satisfy consumer wishes and demands, the dairy industry has made constant efforts in the areas of product development and innovation. This has resulted in the presence of a wide range of dairy products with varying fat and/or sugar content in all product categories on the market, including milks, yoghurts, fermented milks and cheeses. This broad range of dairy products allows European consumers to compose a healthy and balanced diet, including nutritious dairy foods according to their individual needs and preferences.

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connect to the world of dairy

4. Dairy with added sugars are also part of a healthy, balanced diet

In addition to their natural content of sugars, some dairy products, usually flavoured fruit yoghurts, fermented milks and milk drinks may also contain added sugars. Sugars are added to products for a variety of different reasons, mainly for sweetening purposes, but can also be used to create texture, provide bulk, adding colour or increasing shelf-life. Although these dairy products may contain added sugars it is important to bear in mind that these products are also nutrient-rich, and will make an important contribution to the diet’s nutritional adequacy. It is important to note that for the most part the term “added sugar” describes the same group of sugars as “free sugars”.

Flavoured milks and yoghurts are a way to increase milk consumption and boosting the population’s vitamin, mineral and protein intake. Besides, flavoured fruit yoghurts, fermented milks and milk drinks are also consumed for their sweet flavour and it should be noted that alternatives to dairy products with added sugars often do not contain a similar nutritional value.

In addition, a number of studies show that yoghurt consumption, including flavoured ones, has a neutral or beneficial effect on weight status\(^3\),4,5. Other studies have shown that consumption of flavoured milk is associated with better overall diet quality without any adverse impact on weight\(^6\),7,8. Recent studies also show a positive association between yoghurt consumption, including flavoured ones, and diet quality and metabolic profile in children\(^9\) and adults\(^10\). Yoghurt consumption, including flavoured ones, is also associated with a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes\(^11\).

It is important to distinguish the sources of different foods containing added sugars when determining nutrient relevance. Foods which contain several essential nutrients in addition to being a source of added sugars should clearly be distinguished from foods which are nutritionally poor and which provide empty calories. It is key that consumers continue to be educated and provided with clear, straightforward information on the distinction between the different types of carbohydrates and the difference between

\(^5\) M.A. Martinez-Gonzalez & al. (2014) Yogurt consumption, weight change and risk of overweight/obesity: The SUN cohort study. Nut, Met & Cardio Dis, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.numecd.2014.05.015
\(^7\) Fayet F et al (2013). Australian children who drink milk (plain or flavored) have higher milk and micronutrient intakes but similar body mass index to those who do not drink milk. Nutr Res: 33: 95-102.
nutrient-rich and nutrient-poor products that contain added sugars. This will enable consumers to make informed decisions concerning their diet.

5. The dairy industry helps to support healthy diets and lifestyle

EDA and its members are keeping abreast of the scientific evidence that underpins the debate on sugars and their potential impact on obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). The dairy industry is well aware of the challenges of the dietary choices of consumer and public health related issues, and wishes to contribute to its solution.

Through product design, the dairy industry intends to respond to consumer needs and wishes by offering a variety of products.

6. Conclusion

In addition to a varied and balanced diet, an active lifestyle is important for health. The maintenance of energy balance, which factors in total calories consumed from diverse foods containing macronutrients, including added sugars, as well as those expended through basal metabolism and physical activity, is central to metabolic health and weight management.

Sugars are naturally present in many basic foods such as milk, fruit and vegetables. It is important to distinguish between naturally present and added sugar and to recognise that it is not simply just all about calories, as other nutritional factors also need to be given importance. In fact research and dietary guidance increasingly recognise the importance the whole diet on health and try to distinguish the most favourable patterns. After all we do eat foods rather than pure nutrients. Looking at the health effects of just a few single nutrients is overly simplistic. EDA and its members remain committed to collaborate further on this issue with policy-makers, industry groups and stakeholders in a constructive way to help make a positive impact on overall health and accompany consumers in their aspiration to live healthier lifestyles.