Dairy foods are an important part of a healthy diet

Dietary advice all over Europe recommends that dairy products be consumed daily during all stages of life. On average it is recommended to consume 2-3 portions of dairy foods per day for adults and 3-4 portions for children. International institutions and public health authorities consider dairy products as an important part of a healthy balanced diet (1). Many people in Europe do not comply with dietary recommendations and guidelines for dairy intake, in particular adolescent girls, young women, and frail elderly people (the latter representing a growing proportion of the population in the EU) (2). Insufficient intake of dairy products may lead to unbalanced and inadequate intakes of nutrients with consequences for public health. Consuming dairy on a daily basis contributes to a better nutrient status (3, 4, 5) and is an easy, enjoyable and affordable part of a healthy and balanced diet.

Dairy foods are naturally nutrient-rich

Milk, yoghurt and cheese are naturally rich in many essential nutrients, such as high-quality protein, calcium, phosphorous, potassium, iodine, and the B-vitamins (in particular B2 and B12) (6). Dairy also contains smaller amounts of vitamin A, niacin, folate, vitamin B6, vitamin D, magnesium, selenium and zinc. A small portion of cheese (30g), or two pots of yoghurt (2 x 125g) or 250ml of milk all contain about 300mg of calcium which is the same amount provided by 3kg of fruits or 750g of vegetables. Calcium from dairy is in general better absorbed by the human body than calcium from plant origin (7).
Health effect of dairy foods

Dairy foods provide many essential nutrients which contribute to good health at all stages of life. High quality protein and calcium are needed in sufficient amounts for normal growth and development of bones in children and adolescents and for the maintenance of bones later in life. Calcium is also needed for the maintenance of normal teeth, and protein also contribute to the maintenance of muscle mass.

During pregnancy and breast-feeding, many of the nutrients such as protein, phosphorous, magnesium, iodine, vitamin B12, vitamin B2 are required in larger amounts.

Scientific studies show that as part of a healthy diet dairy is associated with many health effects, including body weight management and composition, lower blood pressure and reduced risk of type 2 diabetes. A cardio-protective effect of dairy products has been observed in some studies.

Several studies have found no negative links between intake of saturated fat in dairy foods and cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Cheese consumption has shown no adverse effects on cholesterol levels. The explanation for this may lie in the complex composition of milk and dairy foods which, in addition to saturated fat, contain other nutrients and bioactive components such as calcium, potassium and bioactive peptides.

Consumer perspective

Consumers do not eat nutrients; they eat and enjoy whole foods. Nutrition and health policies should look at whole foods and their contribution to the overall diet and health as this is more helpful guidance to the consumers.

The composition of dairy foods is largely defined by nature and the raw material – milk – which is a complex matrix of protein, lactose, fat, essential vitamins and minerals and other bioactive substances. Changes to the natural nutrient composition of dairy foods is often challenging, due to technological limitations, legal framework or consumers’ acceptance.

Nevertheless, constant efforts from the dairy industry over the last decades have resulted in a broad variety of milks, yoghurts, fermented milks and cheeses allowing the consumers to achieve a healthy diet, according to their individual nutritional needs and preferences.
Health and nutritional benefits

References and further reading


9. Commission Regulation (EU) No 432/2012 of 16 May 2012 establishing a list of permitted health claims made on foods, other than those referring to the reduction of disease risk and to children’s development and health.


