



Nutrition Fact Sheet

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DAIRY AND CHILDREN – A HEALTHY COMBINATION

Nutritional importance of milk and dairy products for children and adolescents

MILK AND DAIRY NUTRIENTS ARE IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN HEALTH

Dietary advice all over Europe recommends that dairy products be consumed daily as a part of a healthy diet and during all stages of life. International institutions recommend the consumption of dairy products as an important part of a healthy and 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). Not complying with dietary recommendations may lead to unbalanced and inadequate intakes of nutrients. Consuming dairy daily contributes to a better nutrient status (3, 4, 5) and is an easy and enjoyable part of a healthy and balanced diet.

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS SHOULD CONSUME RECOMMENDED AMOUNTS OF DAIRY EVERY DAY

Several EU Member States (France, Belgium, Ireland, Spain) recommend around 3-4 servings of dairy products per day for children. Others (Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands) recommend around 500-600 mL dairy foods per day for children. However, many children fail to meet the dietary recommendations for dairy intake and hence nutrient requirements (5). Young girls may intentionally reduce their dairy intake to lose weight (6) influenced by the misperception that dairy foods are fattening (7). Dairy consumption during childhood is important for daily nutrient contribution and plays a vital role in meeting nutrient intake recommendations (8).

DAIRY HELPS CHILDREN TO REACH DIETARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Offering school milk and making dairy foods a core component of school meals helps children consume a healthy and nutrient-rich diet. It contributes to overall diet quality and helps to achieve dietary recommendations. The school day of children can be long and the number of meals taken at school can become important in providing the recommended nutrients in sufficient quantity. School kids, especially girls, in general do not get enough calcium (9) which is crucial for bone growth and development.

DAIRY CONSUMPTION DOES NOT CAUSE OBESITY IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Recent data shows that more and more children in Europe drink low-fat milk (10, 11, 12). Dairy products excluding butter account for around 10% of total fat intake in German children aged 1-13 years (10). In the Netherlands, dairy products account for 25% of total energy while milk alone contributed around 6% of total energy to the diet of young children (2). Despite concerns that energy provided by dairy may contribute to childhood obesity, a recent review found no association between dairy intake and measures of adiposity (BMI, body fat) (13). A recent study among adolescents in Portugal also found that those who consumed 2 cups or more of milk per day were significantly less likely to have abdominal obesity than those who consumed less milk (14).



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THE CONTRIBUTION OF MILK AND DAIRY PRODUCTS TO ADDED SUGAR INTAKE IS LOW

Basic foods like fruits and milk contain natural sugars such as fructose and lactose, respectively. Flavoured milks are a good way to increase milk consumption among children and make their diets more nutritious. According to US data, flavoured milk contributes only 3% of added sugars in the diets of 2-18 year old children and adolescents (15). Children that drink flavoured milks have a higher total milk intake than those who drink no flavoured milk while intake of added sugars does not differ much between those groups (16). A recent US study showed that removal of flavoured milks from schools leads to a decrease in overall milk intake and negatively impacts nutrient intake (17).

DRINKING MILK TEACHES CHILDREN HEALTHY EATING HABITS FOR A HEALTHY LIFE

Consuming milk and dairy products in childhood helps children to develop the taste for milk and to adopt healthy eating habits later in life. Studies show that parents influence the attitude of their children towards dairy and dairy intake. When parents drink a lot of milk, their children also have higher intakes of milk and dairy foods (18).

CHILDREN DRINK LESS MILK AND MORE SOFT DRINKS

Studies have shown that children's overall milk intake is decreasing (19, 10, 20). In addition, milk intake decreases with age through middle childhood and adolescence in developed countries (12). When milk is removed from the diet, it is often replaced by potentially nutrient-poor, energy-dense foods and beverages (21, 22). Replacing milk with sweetened beverages leads to an increase in energy intake and to a decrease in calcium intake (23). Studies show a rise in childhood obesity coinciding with a decline in dairy consumption and an increase in sweetened nutrient-poor beverage consumption (24, 25).

DAIRY HAS HEALTH BENEFITS BEYOND ITS NUTRITIONAL VALUE

Milk and dairy foods supply many essential nutrients that contribute to the proper functioning of the body and are relevant for maintaining good health across all life stages. Six out of 11 EU approved children health claims on normal growth and development of bone can be made by certain milks, yoghurts and cheeses (1). Many observational studies also suggest a positive association between dairy intake and dental health. Particularly cheese and yoghurt consumption is linked to less dental caries in children (26, 27). Scientific data shows that higher dairy intake early in life had lower blood pressure in middle childhood (28) or early adolescence (29).

THE IMPORTANCE OF BREAKFAST AND EATING DAIRY PRODUCTS

10-30% of children and adolescents in Europe and in the USA skip breakfast, which may have unfavourable consequences for health and cognitive performance (30). Growing scientific evidence shows that there is a relation between skipping breakfast and nutritional inadequate diets but also with obesity (31). Several studies found higher milk consumption and calcium intakes in children and adolescents who eat breakfast (32, 33). Milk and dairy are recommended to be part of breakfast at home and in childcare facilities (30).

MILK AND DAIRY FOOD ARE VERY AFFORDABLE NUTRIENT SOURCES

Milk and dairy foods provide nutrients in a package kids enjoy and schools can afford. It was shown that milk and yoghurt provide excellent nutrition value in relation to cost (34).

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