



Nutrition Fact Sheet

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HEALTH BENEFITS AND NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF DAIRY

- › To maintain good health through all stages of life, it is recommended to eat dairy as part of healthy and balanced diets. Daily consumption of dairy contributes to ensuring adequate intake of several essential nutrients.
- › Dairy foods are of natural origin and nutrient rich. They naturally provide many essential vitamins and minerals as well as high quality protein.
- › Research shows that dairy has beneficial effects on health beyond its nutritional value. Recent studies show no negative health effects of saturated fat in dairy foods.
- › People enjoy and eat foods, not nutrients. Therefore dietary guidelines and public health policies should focus more on foods and less on single nutrients.
- › Dairy foods are available in a wide range of products, adapted to every consumer's needs and preferences.

DAIRY FOODS IN A HEALTHY DIET

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.

DAIRY FOODS ARE NATURALLY NUTRIENT RICH

Milk, yoghurt and cheese are naturally nutrient-rich foods. They provide us with many essential nutrients, such as calcium, phosphorous, potassium, iodine, magnesium and zinc, vitamin A and the B-vitamins while containing relatively few calories (6). A small portion of cheese, or two pots of yoghurt or 250ml of milk all contain 300mg of calcium which is the same amount provided by 3kg of fruits or 750g of vegetables (www.internubel.be¹). Calcium from dairy is better absorbed by the human body than calcium from plant origin (7). Dairy foods are also excellent sources of high quality protein which contains all amino acids that the human body cannot synthesise itself.

HEALTH EFFECTS OF DAIRY FOODS

Dairy foods provide many essential nutrients which contribute to good health at all stages of life. Protein, calcium and vitamin D 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 (8). Calcium is needed for the maintenance of normal teeth, and protein contribute to the maintenance of muscle mass (9). During pregnancy and breast-feeding, many of the nutrients contained in dairy products, like protein, phosphorous, magnesium, iodine, vitamin B12, vitamin B2 are required in larger amounts (10)

¹ Average calcium content in fruits: +/- 10 mg and in vegetables: +/- 40 mg



Scientific studies show that as part of a healthy diet dairy is associated with health effects beyond the nutritional value of the food products. Dairy foods contribute beneficially to bone health, management of body weight and composition (11, 12) and are associated with lower blood pressure and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes (13, 14, 15, 16).

A number of clinical trials have found no negative links between intake of saturated fat in dairy foods and cardiovascular disease and diabetes (17). Some studies even show a protective effect (18, 19, 20). Saturated fat in cheese has been shown to have no adverse effects on cholesterol levels (21, 22, 23).

CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

Consumers do not eat nutrients, they eat foods. They pay more attention to positive messages (what is good for me), than to negative messages (what should I avoid), which can distort their attitude towards food. Therefore, a more holistic approach rather than a reductionist single nutrient approach is required in nutrition policies (24). Dietary guidelines and public health policies should focus more on foods and less on single nutrients.

Dairy foods have a natural origin, consisting of a complex matrix of protein, fat and a large number of essential minerals and vitamins. Changes to the natural nutrient composition of dairy foods are challenging and limited by a number of factors. However, constant efforts from the dairy industry have resulted in a broad variety of milks, yoghurts, fermented milks and cheeses. This great variety of products in all dairy food categories allows European consumers to compose a healthy diet, according to their individual needs.

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