eda Factsheet

Uniting dairy excellence & ambition

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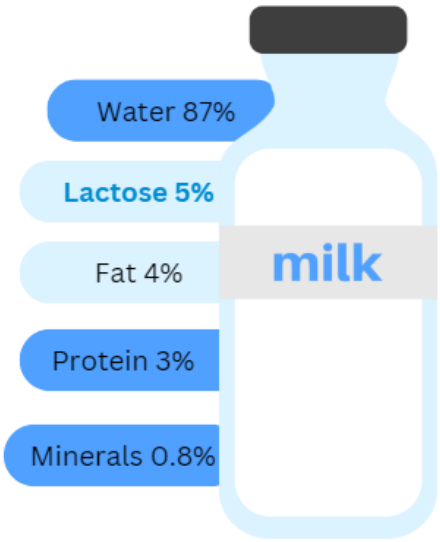
# Sugars in dairy products

## Plain or sweetened, all dairy products can be part of a balanced and healthy diet




1. The term "sugars" includes intrinsic sugars (natural) and added sugars.
2. Lactose is the naturally occurring sugar in milk.
3. Sugars can be added to dairy products to sweeten them, but also for technological purposes.
4. Dairy provides a whole range of essential nutrients (proteins, vitamins and minerals), while its average contribution to added sugar consumption is relatively low at population level.
5. Dairy products are part of a balanced and healthy diet, including plain and sweetened ones.

## Milk and dairy products contain natural sugars

- The term "sugar" includes intrinsic sugars (natural), free, and added sugars. **Lactose is a natural sugar present in dairy products.** [1,2] It is present within the structure of milk and when ingested, it is digested by lactase, an enzyme present in the digestive system, that breaks down lactose into its two fragments: glucose and galactose, that are absorbed within the small intestine [3]. You can find more information on that in our EDA Q&A on lactose intolerance.
- Leaving aside disorders like galactosaemia or lactose intolerance, **there is no evidence of adverse effects of consumption of dairy natural sugars, such as lactose, as confirmed by WHO** [4,5]. In fact, **lactose is a source of energy, and it is particularly important in infancy** (naturally present in breast milk) [1,6]. In contrast to added sugars like sucrose, lactose results only in a small increase in blood sugar levels [8].

- In addition to their natural sugar content, some dairy products (flavoured fruit yoghurts, fermented milks, milk drinks…) may also contain added sugars for different purposes like **sweetening**, **colouring or texture**.
- To know approximately how much added sugar is in a dairy product, lactose must be subtracted from the total sugar content declared on the **labelling of the product**. [9,10]

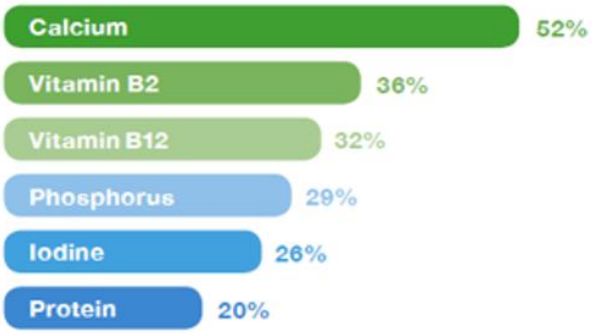
### Average lactose content (gram / 100 gram) [9,10]

| Milk | Chocolate milk | Yoghurt |
|---|---|---|
| 4.6 – 4.8 | 4.1 – 4.9 | 3.2 – 4.5 |

## Dairy is important in a healthy dietary pattern

- Milk and dairy are naturally **nutrient-rich** as they offer a **whole range of essential nutrients**, including **high quality proteins**, but relatively few calories [11,12]. They also naturally provide **vitamins and minerals** and make a significant contribution to the daily nutrient intakes for calcium, riboflavin (vitamin B2), vitamin B12, pantothenic acid (vitamin B5) [2,13], other B-vitamins, phosphorus, potassium, iodine, selenium, magnesium and zinc. Learn more in our EDA factsheet "Nutrient-rich dairy, an affordable source of nutrition.
- This unique nutrient composition makes **dairy contribute to good health at all life stages**. Scientific studies show that, as part of a healthy diet, dairy foods have been linked to potential health benefits including bone health, improved body composition and weight control, reduced blood pressure [14] and reduced risk of type 2 diabetes [15], stroke [16], cardiovascular disease and colorectal cancer. Learn more in EDA nutrition factsheet "Health benefits and nutritional value of dairy"
- Dairy products also help maintain muscle mass and function in older people [3]. There is also a **favourable association between yoghurt consumption (including sugared ones) and diet quality, nutritional status, metabolic profile in children**[17] **and adults**[18] and **reduced risk of type 2 diabetes** [19,20].

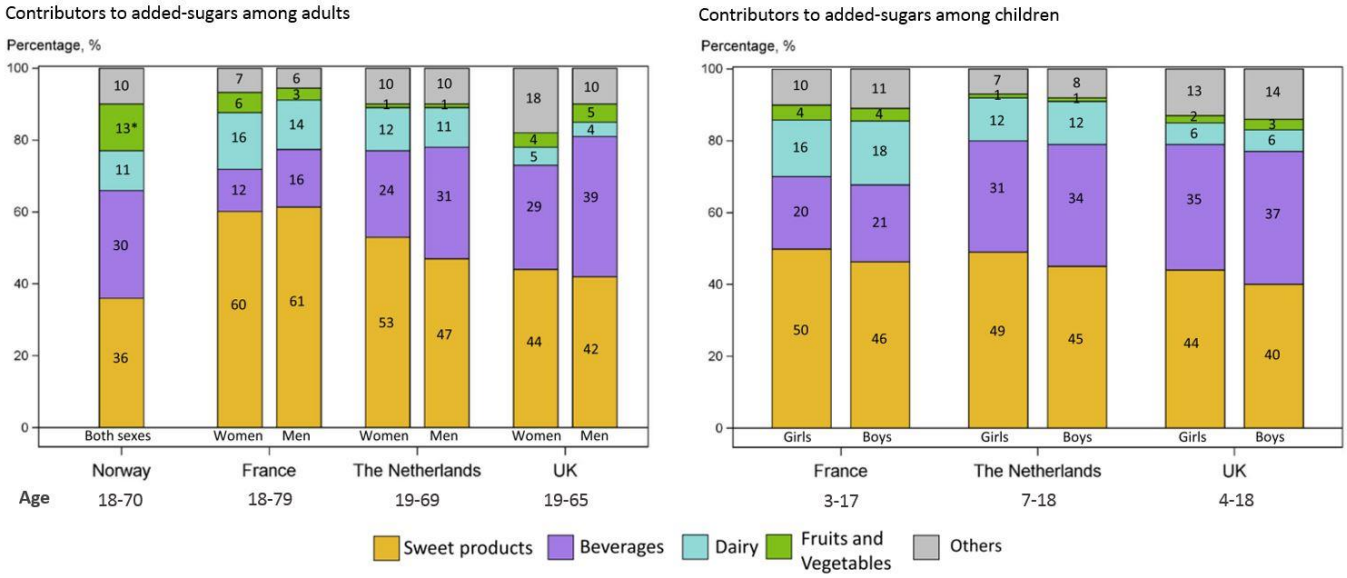
### Average contribution (%) of dairy foods to nutrient intakes in adults in European countries (Based on a survey of eight Member States)




Some dairy products contain added sugars, but they are also nutrient-rich and make an important contribution to the daily intake of vitamins, minerals and high-quality protein.

**Consumption of yogurt and other fermented milk products is associated with improved health outcomes**, including lactose digestion and tolerance, reduced risk of breast and colorectal cancer and type 2 diabetes, improved weight maintenance, and improved cardiovascular, bone, and gastrointestinal health[35]. A study comparing the intake of yogurt and other dairy foods in relation to other dietary habits significantly associated yoghurt and dairy with a better cardiometabolic profile [36]
A systematic review on dietary and policy priorities for cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity concluded that yoghurt, plain or sugared, should be one of the foods to encourage [21]. The beneficial effect of yoghurt, including sugared, may be linked to the low glycaemic index of such product[22].

Besides their nutrient-richness, the contribution of dairy products to **added sugar intake** in the mentioned European Member States, represents only between **4 and 16% in adults** and between **6 and 18% in children** [23], which is far behind sweet products (confectionery, chocolates, cakes, biscuits, sugar and jam) and beverages (coffee, infusions, soft drinks, juices, nectars and alcohol).

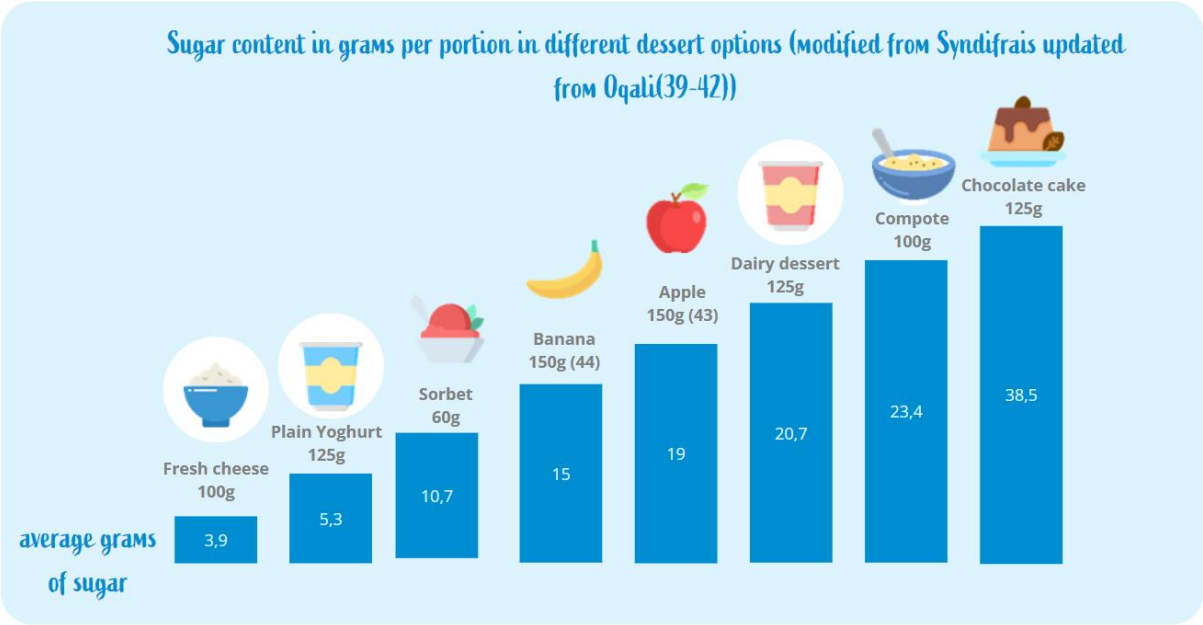



Modified from Azaïs-Braesco et al. [23]

**For instance, in Germany** a study shows that the intake of free sugars by German children has decreased overall in recent decades. The contribution to this from milk and milk products has remained constant at around 12% and is not one of the main sources of added sugars in daily diet.

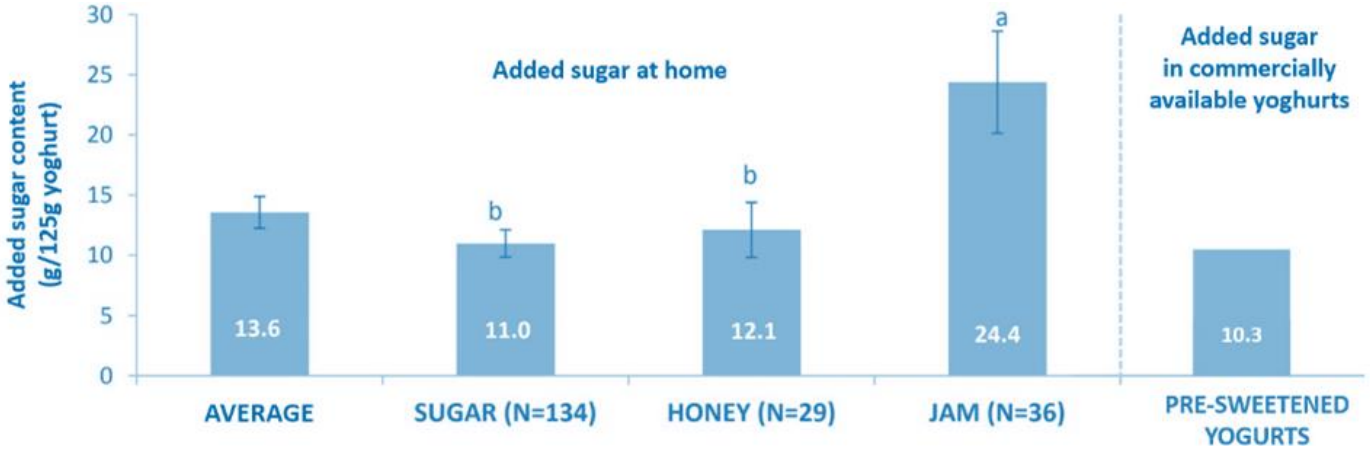
- **The health effects of wholesome foods, such as dairy, are not only due to their nutrient content** but probably also to its complex structures. Although sweetened dairy products contain added sugars, no negative health effects have been observed, in contrast to other added sugar contributors. This might be explained by the interaction of the different components in the **dairy matrix (nutrients, bioactive compounds, live cultures…)** that are associated with beneficial health effects [38].

- When we consider different dessert or snacks options available to consumers, **dairy products contain much less added sugar than typical desserts** like cakes, sorbets or compotes and even less sugar than some fruits.



An interesting additional perspective to consider is the **quantity of sugar added at home** to non-sweetened products. A French study [24] has demonstrated that consumers add on average 13.6 g of sugar per cup of plain yogurt, which is higher that commercially available pre-sweetened yogurts with 10.3 g of added sugar per cup. This study also showed that consumers underestimated by half the quantity of sugar that they added.

Impact of sweetening agent used on quantity of sugar added to 125g of plain yoghurt VS added sugar content in commercially available pre-sweetened yogurts. a, b: significantly differences at $p < 0.05$ (multiple comparison test). Modified from Saint-Eve et al. [24].




## Dairy product variety to ensure recommended consumption and healthy dietary patterns

- **Milk consumption is steadily declining across the EU**, especially in children, adolescents, young women and elderly people. This correlates with the fact that many Europeans have less than an optimal intake of certain nutrients like calcium, selenium, and iodine [25], which are found in many dairy foods.
- To satisfy consumer wishes and demands, and therefore make dairy recommendations easier to reach, dairy companies offer a wide range of products with different fat and/or sugar content, including milks, yoghurts, fermented milks and cheeses. In addition, **the dairy sector has been for many years reducing added sugar** in products such as yoghurts and fermented milks, including products intended for children, in the context of reformulation efforts at national level. As an example, in Italy, dairy processors have been gradually reducing the added sugar content of products such as yogurt and fermented milk with a decrease of 19% between 2011 and 2017. The same effort can be seen for fresh cheeses with fruits with a steep decline of 15.56% between 2011 and 2017[37]. Similar trends are observed in Germany where yogurts marketed to children had their added sugar content reduced by 20% between 2016-2022. Belgian dairy companies achieved a remarkable 15% reduction of added sugars between 2012 and 2021.

## European dairy processors are committed to reducing the content of added sugars in their products

German dairy processors have reduced by 20% the amount of added sugars in yogurts marketed to children between that 2016 and 2022

Italian dairy processors have reduced the amount of added sugars in yogurts and fermented milks by 19% between 2011 and 2017

Belgian dairy processors have achieved a 15% reduction of added sugars in their products between 2012 and 2021

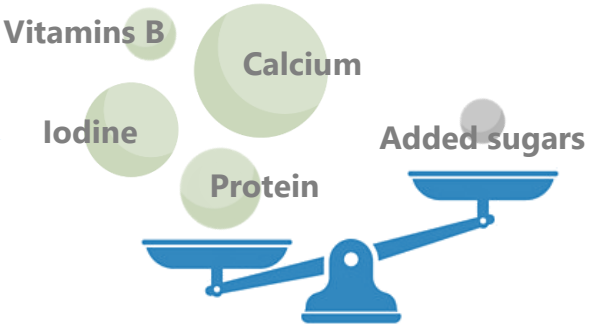
Spanish dairy processors have reduced by an average of 21% the amount of added sugars in regular dairy products (yoghurts, fresh cheese...) and by 11% on average indulgence products (rice pudding, egg custard...) from 2016 to 2024.

- **Sugar is an essential source of energy** and can be enjoyed as part of a varied and balanced diet when consumed in moderation and according to a person's individual needs [26]. Dairy products containing added sugar also deliver a multitude of essential nutrients. In fact, besides non-sweetened dairy, sweetened milks and yoghurts can also be considered **a way to increase milk consumption and boosting the population's vitamin, mineral and protein intake without any adverse impact on weight** [27–29]. Several studies show that yoghurt consumption, including sugared ones, has a neutral or beneficial effect on weight status [30–32] and is also associated with **better overall diet quality without any adverse impact on health**. When milk is removed from the diet, it is often replaced by potentially nutrient-poor, energy-dense foods and beverages.

Several studies show that consumption of yoghurt, including sugared ones, has a neutral or beneficial effect on weight status [30–32] and is also associated with better overall diet quality without any adverse impact on health.

- Research and dietary guidance increasingly recognise the **importance of the whole diet** on health. Therefore, it is important that **consumers continue to be educated** on the distinction between the different types of sugar and the **difference between nutrient-rich and nutrient-poor products**. This will enable them to make informed decisions concerning their diet and choose the most favourable patterns instead of eliminating important sources of high-quality nutrients, like dairy.

Overall composition of dairy is key. Dairy products are low contributors to added sugar intakes in Europe while they are high contributors of essential nutrients in all population groups [13].



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