

Dairy Products & Nutrition

Several people are cutting out dairy these days, swearing it has helped them lose weight, feel more energetic or even made their skin look better. Unfortunately, they are missing out on the numerous benefits that dairy products offer. Learn more about why these nutrient-rich foods are essential for good health.

Nutrient Package

Low-fat dairy products are nutrition powerhouses. Packed with nine essential vitamins and minerals, including bone-building calcium and vitamin D, protein, potassium, vitamins A and B12, riboflavin, niacin and phosphorus, dairy products are not just delicious, they are nutritious. In addition, research has repeatedly shown that when included as part of a healthy diet, low-fat or nonfat dairy products improve overall diet quality.

Role of Dairy in Bone Health

Consuming dairy products, being physically active and maintaining a healthy body weight help build and maintain bone mass throughout life. These things are especially critical during childhood and adolescence, when bones are growing rapidly. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that dairy foods offer a slew of bone-building nutrients including calcium, vitamin D, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium and protein, making them a great option for bone health and to reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

Role of Dairy Heart Health

According to the National Dairy Council, research has shown that a diet high in low-fat dairy, fruits and vegetables, and low in fat and sodium - better known as the DASH Diet - provides significant reductions in blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

Weight

Recent research suggests that when consumed as part of a reduced calorie diet, three servings of low-fat or nonfat dairy can aid in weight management, and many studies show that people who consume more calcium from dairy foods weigh less and/or have less body fat than those who consume little or no dairy. However, some studies have found no relationship between dairy and weight, so further research is needed on this topic before any conclusions are made.

Best Dairy Choices

Milk, including flavored and lactose free milks, and foods made from milk, such as yogurt and cheese, are all considered dairy products. However, foods made from milk with little to no calcium, such as cream cheese and butter, are not considered part of this food group. The best dairy choices are those that are low-fat or fat-free, because full fat cheese, whole milk and yogurt are high in saturated fat. Diets high in saturated fat and dietary cholesterol can increase blood cholesterol and the risk for heart disease. In addition, high fat dairy items

tend to be higher in calories, making it more challenging to maintain a healthy weight. Stick with low-fat (1%) or nonfat (skim) milk, yogurt and cheese. If you currently use high-fat dairy products, gradually switch to low-fat or fat free. For example, instead of whole milk, switch to reduced-fat (2%), then low-fat, and if desired, nonfat.

Recommending Servings

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid recommend that everyone nine years of age and older consume three servings of low-fat and fat-free dairy products each day to help provide adequate calcium, potassium, vitamin A and magnesium, all of which are lacking in the average American's diet. Children under the age of nine should have two servings daily. One serving of dairy equals one cup of milk or yogurt, one and a half ounces of natural cheese or two ounces of processed cheese.

Get Three Servings

If you struggle to get the recommended servings, there are ways to boost your intake. At breakfast, make oatmeal with milk rather than water, or layer yogurt, fruit and whole grain cereal for a parfait. For snacks, whip up a fruit and yogurt smoothie, enjoy string cheese with fresh veggies or have a glass of milk with a handful of almonds. At meals, add low-fat cheese to salads, sandwiches, casseroles, soups, or vegetables.

Lactose Intolerance

Contrary to popular belief, people who are lactose intolerant can still consume dairy, all it takes is a little knowledge. The easiest option is one of the several reduced-lactose or lactose-free milk products on the market. Cultured dairy products, such as yogurt with live active cultures, contain gut-friendly bacteria that will help digest lactose. Aged hard cheeses such as cheddar and Swiss are lower in lactose and may be tolerated. It's best to start out with small portions and consume dairy with other foods. Finally, you can take lactase enzyme pills to help digest dairy products. These tips may not apply to everyone with lactose intolerance, so talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian for more guidance.