

The Health Benefits of Dairy

» Three Servings Per Day Recommended

Federal experts now recommend a generous daily intake of fat-free and low-fat milk and milk products. The recommendations are contained in a document called *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, and the 2005 edition recommends three servings of dairy each day.

In conjunction with these recommendations, you may be familiar with the “3-A-Day” program, which stresses the importance of three servings of dairy per day.

These dietary guidelines state that you should not avoid dairy products because of concerns that these products lead to weight gain. In fact, adding dairy products to your diet has been associated with overall diet quality and adequate intake of many nutrients.

If you are lactose intolerant, check with your nurse practitioner to find out what types of dairy food you can eat and which types you should avoid.

The most reliable and easiest ways to experience all the health benefits that come from dairy products is to choose alternatives within the milk food group, such as yogurt or lactose-free milk.

Types of Dairy

The three main types of dairy foods are milk, cheese and yogurt. Milk is a nutrient-dense food, which means that it provides many nutrients for its calorie content. Milk is available in many varieties, including whole, 2% reduced fat, 1% low-fat and nonfat.

There are more than 400 varieties of cheese, and they are all made from milk. Cheese is also a very nutrient-dense food. In fact, it takes 10 pounds of milk to make just 1 pound of whole-milk cheese. And about one-third of all milk produced in the United States is used to make cheese.

Yogurt is a mixture of milk and cream that is fermented by certain types of bacteria. There are many types of yogurt, depending on variables such as the type of bacterial culture and the amount of milk fat. Sweeteners and flavors are often added to yogurt.

Nutrients in Dairy

Three (or four) servings of dairy foods for people ages 9 years and older are needed to ensure adequate calcium intake. The best way to get calcium is by eating and drinking foods that naturally contain calcium. Milk and dairy foods also provide other important nutrients, such as protein, phosphorus, potassium, riboflavin, vitamin A, vitamin B₁₂, magnesium and niacin.

The dietary guidelines also identify seven nutrients that fall short in adult diets and five nutrients that fall short in the diets of most children. Dairy foods supply four of the seven nutrients for adults (calcium, potassium, magnesium and vitamin A) and three of the five nutrients for children (calcium, magnesium and potassium).

Health Benefits of Dairy

Studies have shown that a combination of nutrients in dairy products, such as calcium, vitamin D and phosphorus, are important for bone health. This intake of nutrients is especially important to bone health during childhood and adolescence. Also, high-calcium and dairy food intake throughout life is an important factor in reducing the risk of fracture from osteoporosis.

Dairy may help with weight management. In one study, obese people who included three to four servings of dairy in a balanced, reduced-calorie diet lost more weight and fat than people who consumed similar amounts of calcium through calcium pills, or who ate fewer servings of dairy per day. And another study showed that girls ages 9 to 14 who consumed more dairy products weighed less and had less fat in their midsection.

The combination of nutrients in dairy foods also reduces the risk of hypertension. In particular, potassium is a key nutrient in lowering blood pressure.

Get More Dairy in Your Diet

There are a lot of simple ways you can add dairy foods and products to your diet:

- Prepare instant or canned soup with fat-free milk instead of water, and fill it with fresh, frozen or canned vegetables.
- Mix granola with a high-fiber, whole-grain cereal, and top it with low-fat milk.
- Dip fresh fruit in frozen yogurt.
- Substitute low-fat plain yogurt for mayonnaise in tuna, egg or potato salad.
- Fill an ice cube tray with chocolate milk, and place it in the freezer to freeze. Then fill a tall glass with the frozen cubes, and pour cold leftover coffee over the cubes. NP

Additional Notes:
