Dear Alice,

Is milk good or bad for you?

— Cow lover

Answer

Dear Cow lover,

There’s a lot of confusing information out there about dairy products, so milk this research-driven response for all it’s worth! Studies show that milk and dairy products (foods made from milk that contain significant amounts of calcium) are nutritious and have health benefits. Milk and dairy are high in protein and calcium, which is udder-ly great for bone and muscle health! Not to mention the phosphorous, magnesium, vitamin A, vitamin D, and riboflavin that a person can get from milk and its derivatives. There is some evidence to suggest that dairy can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity, and it’s recommended that children have the dairy equivalent of about two cups of milk a day, while adults have about three cups daily. Few adverse effects have been found, but there are a couple of concerns to keep in mind before rushing to the cheese aisle.

Different people may have different relationships to milk and dairy, depending on their individual health concerns and personal beliefs. Whole milk and whole fat dairy products, while brimming with protein, are high in saturated fat, so non-fat and low-fat options can provide lighter alternatives that are less likely to raise cholesterol levels. For those who are allergic to milk proteins, experience lactose intolerance, or choose not to drink dairy milk for any number of reasons, there are other ways to get these nutrients. Many other foods and drinks have similar nutrients to milk, such as soy products, canned fish, calcium-fortified juices, certain leafy greens, or milk alternatives made of rice or almonds. In regards to protein, soy milk is the plant-based milk substitute that’s closest to the protein content of cow’s milk, while the protein content of oat, almond, and rice milk is very low. There have been reported instances of nutritional deficiencies in children who consumed plant-based milk substitutes, but more research is needed to understand the nutritional implications of such substitutes.
There are also a couple common concerns about the source of the milk. Although there have been concerns about antibiotics in milk, batches of milk are tested prior to human consumption and all milk found with antibiotics must be thrown away. Some people are also concerned about the effect that bovine somatotropin (bST), a hormone used to help cows increase milk production, has on their health. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has determined that milk from cows that were treated with bST is safe for human consumption. For folks concerned about the possible effects of antibiotics and bST, it’s possible to buy United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-certified organic milk, which is available at most supermarkets. It may be helpful to note, however, that the American Academy of Pediatrics found that organic milk isn’t more beneficial for children than non-organic choices (and it’s often much pricier!). Some people are attracted to the idea of drinking raw milk, which is milk that hasn’t been pasteurized. However, this isn’t recommended due to the adverse effects it can have on the body. The pasteurization process is what kills harmful bacteria in the milk (E. coli, Salmonella, and Listeria, to name a few), and without this process, raw milk puts consumers at risk of getting sick.

There is clearly a lot to churn over when it comes to whether to consume dairy, but there’s no need to cry over spilt milk! Understanding the research on the subject can help you make the right mooooo-ve for you.

Alice!

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