Milk — Bad or good? \[1\]

Dear Alice,

Is milk good or bad for you?

— Cow lover

Answer

Dear Cow lover,

Why does a milking stool have only three legs? Because the cow has the udder! Get it? Unfortunately, there’s not such a definitive answer to YOUR question. Research on the health effects of drinking milk has produced mixed results. As with any other food group, it’s a good idea to consider the pros and cons of dairy consumption.

Before a discussion of pros and cons, here is a run-down on recent milk research as it relates to osteoporosis. Although it is thought that drinking milk every day helps ward off osteoporosis, a small group of renowned researchers recently found that drinking too much milk can actually contribute to calcium loss. This is because the high amount of protein in milk thins blood and tissue, causing it to become acidic. In order to neutralize the acidity, the body draws out calcium from bones. As a result, the more milk you consume, the more calcium you need to process the protein intake. With that being said, drinking moderate amounts of milk each day (500 to 700 milligrams daily) is still thought to be good for your bones. More information on osteoporosis can be found in Calcium, milk, and osteoporosis? \[2\].

Moooving on, here is a list of the various pros and cons of drinking milk:

Pros:

- Milk is high in calcium, which is the key for healthy bones. Additionally, the calcium in milk is well absorbed by the digestive tract because the vitamin D and lactose found in milk facilitate calcium absorption. Still, it's possible to get ample calcium without drinking dairy milk — by eating foods such as tofu, soy milk, or greens such as kale. See Calcium — How much is enough? \[3\] for more information.
• Whole milk is brimming with protein, which is beneficial for muscle growth.
• Studies have shown that drinking milk can help regulate weight gain.
• Skim milk is very low in fat and cholesterol, and is a complete source of protein.
• Milk is also a good source of phosphorous, magnesium, vitamin A, vitamin D, and riboflavin (a B vitamin).

Cons:

• Whole milk is high in saturated fat, which can increase cholesterol level.
• Milk is a common cause of food allergy (allergy to milk protein).
• Many people lack the enzyme to digest lactose (milk sugar). This is called lactose intolerance, which causes bloating, gas, and diarrhea.
• Milk may contain the antibiotics given to the cow while it is lactating. It has been argued that humans subsequently absorb these antibiotics upon drinking milk, potentially leading harmful bacteria to become more resistant to these antibiotics. As a result, when antibiotics are prescribed, they may not be as effective at killing the bacteria.
• Some research has found a correlation between drinking milk that is produced by cows injected with the bovine growth hormone (rBST) and cancer. However, research shows highly mixed results.

As a side note, if you are concerned about the possible effects of antibiotics and rBST on your body, it is possible to buy antibiotic-free (and typically hormone-free, as well) milk from specialty grocers that carry natural foods. Alternatively, you can purchase USDA-certified organic milk, which is available at most supermarkets.

Overall, when researching the pros and cons of milk, make sure to take into account that there are two opposing sides — one that believes that milk is great for the body, and another that believes that milk does not aid against osteoporosis and is even harmful for the body. Whatever camp you choose to join, it really helps to be informed. Seize every opportunity (to obtain information), and milk it for all its worth!

Alice!

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