

Articles for Health Professionals

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Dairy foods are major sources of total fat and saturated fat in the American diet. They also provide critical nutrients for our health, including protein, calcium, and vitamin D, among others. People

who choose to “Moove” to low fat or fat-free dairy foods can lower their fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol intake and reduce their health risks.



Why the Concern?

The food choices we make can affect us in many ways, including our long-term health. Drinking whole or reduced fat (2%) milk and eating these types of dairy products provides more fat and saturated fat than most of us need in our diets, and can contribute to health risks. Major health conditions associated with fat and/or saturated fat intake are obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.

Obesity

Obesity is a growing health concern in the U.S. Current estimates tell us that 32 percent of U.S. adults over 20 years of age, or more than 66 million people, are obese. An estimated 17.1 percent of children and adolescents ages two to 19 years of age (12.5 million young people) are obese. Members of low-income families, and racial and ethnic minorities, particularly women, are more likely than others to be overweight or obese.

Persons who are obese are at increased risk of death from all causes, as well as from cardiovascular disease and cancer specifically. Obesity is second only to cigarette smoking as a contributor to overall mortality in this country. Obese persons are more likely to have gallbladder disease, sleep disturbances, and certain types of cancer. Low self-esteem and depression also can affect persons who are obese, particularly among young people.

Diabetes

One result of the increased incidence of obesity in recent years is a dramatic rise in type two diabetes. The number of Americans with diagnosed diabetes more than doubled between 1980 and 2004. There are 20.8 million children and adults in the U.S. with diagnosed or undiagnosed diabetes and the numbers are rising.

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The health complications associated with diabetes, including blindness, nerve damage which can lead to amputations, kidney disease, and heart disease are life-changing and/or life-threatening. The good news is that changing one's lifestyle, including reducing fat intake, has been shown to reduce the incidence of diabetes in persons at high risk for the disease.

Cardiovascular Disease

Cardiovascular diseases, including heart disease and stroke, claim close to a million lives each year. Heart disease is the leading cause of death among men and women in the U.S. Risk factors for heart disease include being obese and having an unhealthy blood lipid profile and/or high blood pressure. High fat diets contribute to all of these conditions.

Cancer

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the U.S. High-fat diets increase risk for several forms of cancer, including colorectal, pancreatic, and prostate.

What You Can Do

Choose to Mooove to Low Fat Dairy

There are lots of healthful choices you can make to get the critical nutrients found in dairy foods while cutting the fat. In fact, one of the current recommendations for a healthful diet (for everyone over the age of nine) is to consume three cups of low fat or fat-free milk or milk products per day. (Two cups per day of low fat or fat-free milk or milk products is recommended for children ages two to eight years.)

Switching to low fat or fat-free dairy foods does **not** decrease calcium or vitamin D intake. Fat-free milk provides about 300 milligrams of calcium per cup and whole milk provides about 290 milligrams per cup. The vitamin D content of vitamin D-fortified whole, low fat, and fat-free milk is the same: 100 International Units. All you lose when you "mooove" to lower fat milk is the fat and saturated fat!



Promote Healthful Choices in Schools

Although lifestyle choices are ultimately made by individuals, communities can provide environments that promote healthy choices. An important part of our communities are the schools. An estimated 55 million children/youth attend our nation's public schools (grades K-12). Many parents and health professionals are concerned about the increased availability of competitive foods at schools. These include meal alternatives such as pizza, hamburgers, French fries, etc., from outside vendors, as well as foods and beverages in vending machines on school campuses. In general, competitive foods are high in fat, calories, sugar, and/or sodium, and many health professionals believe they contribute to rising obesity rates in young people.

As far as milk is concerned, schools have a long way to go to provide lower fat choices. In 2000, a national survey reported that 63 percent of all milk ordered by public schools in a typical week was either whole or reduced fat (2%), both considered high in fat. Another survey is being conducted in 2006, and it will be interesting to see if there have been improvements in milk offered in our schools. Product placement and nutrition education can influence the type of milk that students select. Get involved in your local schools and see how you can influence children's food choices.

In 2004, Congress passed legislation that required all local school districts participating in a USDA school meal program, such as the National School Lunch Program, to establish a wellness policy by the beginning of the 2006-07 school year. One component of the wellness policy must be nutrition guidelines for all foods and beverages available on school campuses. Interested parents, teachers, students, and health professionals can work together to promote healthful choices on school campuses.

Grocery Stores

What type of milk is available in your grocery store or supermarket? Chances are that the type of milk available and its cost will affect your milk purchases. If your favorite store does not carry low fat or fat-free milk, you can ask the store manager to stock it, or you may be able to pick up your milk elsewhere.



Special Considerations When Using Lower Fat Milk

The vitamin E content of milk products decreases as fat is removed and fat-free milk contains the least amount of the fat-soluble vitamin. If your primary dairy source is fat-free milk, be sure to obtain adequate vitamin E from other food sources or from a vitamin supplement.

One component of milk that is lost when all of the fat is removed is conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). CLA is being studied for its role as an anti-cancer agent and for other potential health benefits. Meats are another source of CLA. People at high risk for cancer (among others) may benefit from choosing low fat rather than fat-free milk to provide CLA in their diets.

Summary

Higher fat milk contributes significantly to fat and saturated fat consumption. Reducing the amount of fat and saturated fat in your diet can reduce health risks associated with high-fat diets. Changing milk consumption patterns to low fat and fat-free choices can reduce fat and saturated fat intakes while maintaining consumption of critical nutrients such as protein, calcium, and vitamin D. Getting involved in school-based nutrition education can be helpful in promoting healthful dietary choices for children.

