

Milk Isn't Bad For You (But 6 Types of People May Want to Avoid It)

 bornfitness.com/is-milk-bad-for-you

Barbara Brody

July 17, 2018

It used to be that few foods seemed as wholesome as a nice, cold glass of milk.

Your mom may have served milk with dinner or offered it at bedtime when you were feeling restless. You've seen your favorite celebs don milk mustaches as part of an iconic marketing campaign that's spanned 20 years and appeared to solidify the idea that milk was not just *healthy*, but a *necessity*.

Turns out, it's not.

"Any kind of natural food is not inherently bad; it's eating patterns that can contribute to disease," says Robin Foroutan, RDN, an integrative dietician at the Morrison Center in New York City and a spokesperson for the National Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

In other words, there's little reason to think that any individual whole food on its own is going to ruin your diet. Milk isn't dangerous. But milk also isn't for everyone.

Here's what you should know about who benefits most from milk, and who would be better off cutting back or going dairy-free.

Just the Facts on Milk's Nutrition

Milk—or, more specifically, cow's milk—is indeed a good source of vitamins and minerals.

"Milk is a great source of protein, calcium, vitamin D, which are 'nutrients of concern' in the U.S. population," meaning that many people don't get enough, says Vasanti Malik, PhD, a research scientist in the department of nutrition at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "It also contains magnesium, along with other minerals and nutrients."

"If you don't consume dairy it's really hard to get enough calcium," which is crucial for strong bones, says Ali Webster, PhD, RD, Associate Director of Nutrition Communications for the International Food Information Council Foundation. The vitamin D and potassium in milk are also important for bone health.

Webster acknowledges that you can't rely solely on milk to fight osteoporosis. You also need magnesium (milk has some but isn't a great source) and vitamin K (found in leafy greens, fish, meat, and eggs)—but it does help you check off a lot of these boxes at once.

That said, milk isn't the sole source of bone-supporting nutrients. A cup of spinach, for instance, has 350 mg calcium (slightly more than the 300 mg found in a cup of milk), and also provides fiber and folate. A 6-oz can of salmon with bones provides 380 mg of calcium, plus heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

How Much Milk Should You Drink?

If you do choose to consume dairy, Malik says that one serving a day is a good guideline. Ashley Koff, RDN, CEO of The Better Nutrition Program, agrees. She tells clients who opt to include dairy in their diets to “accessorize” meals with it—say, one slice of cheese on a sandwich or a splash of milk in your coffee.

That might surprise you, considering that the USDA recommends 3 servings daily. But Koff, Malik, and Foroutan say that number may be overkill. The only people who might need that much dairy are children and the elderly, because they tend to be picky eaters who might not otherwise get the nutrients they need.

Why You Shouldn't Overdo It On Dairy

Assuming you like milk and aren't allergic to it, most experts say it's fine and arguably even healthy to continue drinking it—at least in moderation.

The reason why eating too much dairy isn't advisable is because it can push other healthy foods (like fruits and vegetables) out of your diet.

Conversely, the opposite is true: When people cut milk out of their diet and find they feel better, it's often not because milk was wreaking havoc on their bodies. It's because their overall diet quality improves when they replace that dairy with more nutrient-dense produce and other whole foods.

Another thing to consider is that, unless you're going with skim milk, the drink will contain saturated fat. While the effects of saturated fat are hotly debated, most health experts agree that increasing saturated fat consumption elevates cholesterol, which can in turn increase your risk of cardiovascular disease.

Milk Myths You *Don't* Need to Worry About

Not all concerns about milk are created equal, at least from a scientific perspective. For example, rumors that consuming milk will mess with your hormones, or cause heart disease or diabetes are largely unfounded.

Most mainstream experts say that, with the exception of a possible increased risk of prostate cancer (more on that later), the quality of any evidence indicating that milk would be dangerous is pretty weak—think “associations” or “based on animal studies” rather than high-quality controlled trials.

Also, most studies purporting to show milk's potential harms also need to be considered in the context of other contradictory research. For instance, a study published earlier this year in the *British Journal of Nutrition* found that eating full-fat dairy products increased the risk of pre-diabetes and type 2 diabetes—yet a 2016 study, published in the journal *Circulation*, found that eating full-fat dairy was associated with a *lower* diabetes risk.

But Does Milk Make You Fat?

If you've heard that milk will make you fat, that's not proven, either.

"It's true that milk comes from mammals and has a biological purpose—to feed infants so they can grow up and develop," says Foroutan.

Milk naturally contains growth hormone as well as IGF-1 (insulin like growth factor-1) — both of which are designed to make animals get bigger. But there's really no proof that the amount found in milk would contribute to obesity—nor is it enough to make you get jacked. (There is some proof that drinking milk after a workout can [help you build muscle](#), mostly thanks to the protein content).

Of course, if you eat ice cream everyday or put cheese on everything, you might very well gain weight. But if you eat dairy—even full-fat dairy—in small amounts, it might actually help you slim down. "Fat sends an important signal to the brain that you're full, which can help with portion control," says Foroutan.

The 6 Good Reasons to Ditch Dairy

While research is always evolving, for now the preponderance of evidence points to dairy being beneficial (or at least not harmful) for most people, says Webster.

For instance, a [2016 review of meta-analyses](#) on concluded that dairy consumption was associated with easier weight control, neutral or reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, lower risk of stroke, and higher bone mineral density (though it has not actually been proven to reduce fractures).

That all sounds great, but of course it's not the full story. The biggest issue is that each person's body is unique.

While most people seem to be able to tolerate at least some dairy, "if you don't break it down well or have some sensitivity to it, then consuming dairy products may trigger inflammation," says Foroutan.

So if you've been thinking you might be better off going dairy free, or at least limiting it to an occasional treat, your hunch might be correct if you fall into one of the following categories:

1. You're lactose intolerant.

A true dairy allergy is relatively rare, but many people are lactose intolerant—meaning that they can't properly digest the primary sugar (lactose) found in milk. As a result, eating anything with lactose triggers unpleasant GI symptoms like cramps, gas, or diarrhea.

"It's easy to detect, because you'd have a pretty quick response to eating or drinking something with lactose in it," says Foroutan. If you'd like a more official diagnosis, ask your doctor for a [lactose tolerance \(blood\) test or a hydrogen breath test](#)

If you are, in fact, lactose intolerant, you may still be able to eat certain types of dairy. While you'll have to steer clear of milk and ice cream or suffer the consequences, hard cheeses and probiotic-rich yogurt usually don't contain any lactose.

2. You're not lactose intolerant, but dairy still upsets your stomach.

Maybe you've been tested for lactose intolerance and the test came back negative, but you swear that eating dairy makes your tummy feel lousy. You're probably not imagining it.

Dairy contains proteins such as casein and whey that many people are sensitive to, says Foroutan. "Unfortunately, it's very difficult to test for a sensitivity," she says.

If your gut is telling you that something is off, feel free to trust it. Or consider doing an elimination diet: Give up all dairy for a few weeks, then do a "challenge" during which you introduce different types of dairy products one by one to see how you react. (Butter, for instance, doesn't have much lactose, but it has casein and whey.) You may want to see a nutritionist for guidance during your experiment.

3. Milk makes you feel sluggish.

Digestive issues aren't the only possible signs of an intolerance. Someone who feels bloated, tired, or sluggish after eating dairy might be sensitive to one or more of the components in it. "Some people don't even notice until the next day; sometimes we call it a 'food hangover,'" says Foroutan.

If that sounds like you, it might be worth eliminating dairy for a few weeks and slowly trying to reintroduce it to see if it's really the culprit. But the bottom line is that if you feel better without dairy, you don't have to have it.

4. You feel congested when you eat it.

You might have heard that dairy increases mucus production, but there's really no good research to support that notion.

That said, it's possible that milk makes *you* phlegmy. Koff says this happens to her whenever she has milk or ice cream, and that many of her clients report the same thing.

The reason why this might happen to some people isn't totally clear, but it likely comes back to an intolerance. "If you have a sensitivity to something and you consume it, it will cause inflammation and your digestive tract will secrete more mucus; it's how the intestines protect themselves," says Foroutan.

5. You have a higher-than-average risk of prostate cancer.

The link between dairy consumption and several types of cancer is murky. Some studies, for instance, have said that it might raise the risk of breast cancer, whereas others show that it lowers it. (The [most research](#) seems to conclude that it's associated with a lower risk of breast cancer.)

Prostate cancer is a little different. The proof that dairy substantially raises prostate cancer risk is hardly iron-clad, but there's enough reason for experts (including those at the [American Cancer Society](#)) to be somewhat concerned.

"It's not the strongest evidence, but it's worth mentioning," says Malik. "If you're at high risk of prostate cancer—maybe you have a family history or your PSA (prostate specific antigen, which can be measured via a blood test) is elevated—you might consider decreasing dairy."

6. You just don't want to eat dairy.

For most healthy adults, the best reason to eat dairy is because you like it. If you're vegan and don't wish to consume anything that involves animals, or are concerned about the toll that dairy farming takes on the environment, those are perfectly valid reasons to cut milk from your diet, says Malik.

Yes, you might struggle to get certain nutrients, like calcium, but there are other ways to meet your needs. [Tofu, some beans, and certain leafy greens](#) also contain calcium. When in doubt, consult a registered dietician.

Key takeaways:

- Milk is a good source of calcium, vitamin D, protein, and potassium. These nutrients are crucial for good health (including bone health). But you can also get them from other sources too.
- Consider limiting dairy to one serving a day so you don't overconsume saturated fat or miss out on other nutritious foods.
- If milk makes you feel sick, even if you're not lactose intolerant, feel free to scale back or skip it entirely. You can get the nutrients found in dairy from other foods, or talk to your doctor about taking a supplement.
- Some research has linked high dairy consumption with an increased risk of prostate cancer. If your risk for this disease is already elevated, you may want to limit or cut out dairy.

READ MORE:

What is the Keto Diet? (And Should I Try It?)

Is Sugar Bad for You?

Fix Your Diet: Understanding Proteins, Carbs and Fats