



Dairy Foods and School Meals

TALKING POINTS

The Value of School Meals

- School meals contribute significantly to the health and well-being of our nation’s youth and in the lives of families and communities. The nutritional quality of school meals and their consistency with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) make them a vital resource for millions of children.
- For many children, school meals are a food security lifeline and may be the only healthy meal that they receive on some days. 29 million students rely on the school meal program for a significant portion of their daily nutrition. (1)
- The nutritional quality of school meals improved significantly between 2003 and 2018, providing the most significant contribution to children’s diet quality without population disparities. (2)

School Meals and Dairy Foods

- Dairy foods make important nutrient and health contributions to school meals.
 - According to [USDA FNS](#), children who participate in school meals consume more dairy milk, fruits and vegetables than non-participants and they consume fewer desserts, snacks and non-milk beverages. (3)
- Starting as early as 4 years of age, children do not meet daily dairy recommendations, with communities of color consuming the least. The milk and dairy foods (i.e., cheese and yogurt) provided in school meals are a critical pathway to help ensure children have a chance to meet their daily dairy servings to benefit from dairy’s nutrients.
 - School meals provide 77% of total daily dairy milk consumption and 70% of total dairy consumption for low-income children ages 5-18. (4)
 - According to USDA data, foods provided as part of school meals are the richest source of dairy in children’s diets. (5)

Flavored Milk

Dairy community efforts to reduce added sugar in flavored milk

- Since 2007, the U.S. dairy community has reduced added sugars in school milk by 54%. Currently, the average added sugar content in 8 ounces of flavored school milk is 7.6 grams. The average flavored milk served in schools has 126 calories – just 29 more calories than unflavored milk. (6)
- In 2023, dairy companies announced a [Healthy School Milk Commitment](#). Which is a pledge to deliver milk’s 13 essential nutrients to students while reducing calories and added sugars in flavored milk. Beginning with school year 2025-2026, 37 school milk processors representing more than 90% of the school milk volume in the United States commit to providing healthy, nutritious school milk options with no more than 10 grams of added sugar per 8 fluid ounce serving.

Research to support flavored milk in children's diets

- Dairy milk, whether flavored or unflavored, is a good or excellent source of [13 essential nutrients](#), including calcium, vitamin D and potassium – nutrients of public health concern because they are lacking in the diets of the American population, including many students.
- The DGA and the American Academy of Pediatrics recognize that a small amount of added sugars, which fall within the daily calorie limit, can be used to increase the palatability and appeal of nutrient-rich foods, such as low-fat flavored milk. (7,8)
- Flavored milk contributes only 4% of added sugars in the diets of children 2-18 years (9) and flavored milk consumption is not associated with an increased BMI. (10)
- The consumption of flavored milk is associated with higher total milk consumption and better overall diet quality without any adverse impact on weight. (11-15)
 - A recent large study of children 2 to 18 years found that flavored milk drinkers consumed about one additional serving of their recommended daily dairy servings, which contributed to higher consumption of calcium, potassium, magnesium, phosphorus and vitamins A, D, B12 and riboflavin (B2) compared to non-flavored milk drinkers.
 - In fact, flavored milk drinkers consumed 51% more vitamin D, 27% more calcium and 16% more potassium compared to non-flavored milk drinkers.
 - These findings add to the body of scientific evidence and illustrate that the nutritional benefits of flavored milk positively impact overall diet quality. The study underscores that overly restricting total added sugars found in nutrient-rich foods could have unintended consequences on meeting total dairy requirements and nutrient recommendations. (16)
 - A recent epidemiological, cross-sectional study in Greece showed that chocolate milk, despite its added sugar content, was associated with a protective role against childhood overweight/obesity, outweighing the detriments of added sugar. (11)
- Chocolate milk is the most popular milk choice in schools (6) and children drink more when milk is flavored. Flavored milk served in the school meal programs is the least wasted. (17)
- There is a precedent that shows that if flavored milk is taken away, kids drink less milk and get fewer nutrients. Studies have reported that the removal of flavored milk from schools can lead to a decrease in total milk consumption, which could negatively impact children's nutrient intake.
 - In a school district in Colorado, when flavored milk was removed on one or more days of the week, there was an 11.4% increase in the percentage of milk discarded, resulting in a 37.4% decrease in milk consumption. (18)
 - In an urban school district in Massachusetts, significantly fewer students selected milk when flavored milk was removed (56.8% vs. 94%), resulting in significantly lower (54.8% vs. 63.7%) milk consumption. (19)
- A review of 53 different studies showed that flavored milk got the highest palatability rating among children. Children drink more flavored milk than plain milk and, when flavored milk is not available, children drink less plain milk and, consequently, less milk overall. (20)

Role of Sodium

- The majority of the sodium in flavored milk is naturally occurring (i.e., approximately 100 milligrams per 8-ounce serving). While flavored milk does contain modest amounts of added sodium, its purpose is to achieve the desired flavor profile.
- In cheese, salt (and sodium) serves functional and food safety roles. Salt promotes food safety through its role in fermentation, influencing pH and water activity and preventing pathogen growth. (21) Therefore, there are limits to the ability to reduce sodium levels in cheese.

Lactose-Free Dairy Milk

- Lactose intolerance is a real condition that affects many Americans, particularly people of color and Native Americans. Lactose-free dairy milk has the same nutritional profile as regular milk, just without the lactose.
- Lactose-free and reduced-lactose milk meet the school meal pattern requirements for fluid milk. Schools may choose to provide lactose-free and reduced-lactose dairy milk to participants without needing to obtain a written request from a parent or guardian. (22)

Nondairy Beverages

- USDA FNS has established rules for crediting foods in the school meal programs. Nondairy beverages that are not nutritionally equivalent to cow's milk are not creditable.
- USDA FNS explains: "Not all 'milk' is created equal. Drinks made with nuts, rice, or coconuts often contain little or no protein. Nondairy beverages that are not nutritionally equivalent to cow's milk are not a creditable replacement for milk in the CNP. In general, only certain nondairy beverages meet the nutrient standards for nondairy fluid milk substitutes. Nondairy fluid milk substitutes that are not nutritionally equivalent to fluid milk may only credit toward a reimbursable meal or snack with a medical statement from a state-recognized medical authority (a licensed healthcare provider), such as a medical doctor, physician's assistant, or nurse. Most commercial almond, coconut, and rice beverages are not nutritionally equivalent to fluid milk". (23)

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