



# Milk Talk:

## The role of milk and dairy products in human nutrition

### What nutrients does milk provide?

Milk is a major source of dietary energy, high-quality protein and fat. It can make a significant contribution to meeting the required nutrient intakes of calcium, magnesium, selenium, riboflavin, vitamin B12 and pantothenic acid. Milk from some animal species can also be a source of zinc and vitamins A, C, D and B6. Bioavailability of some nutrients in milk, for example calcium, is high compared with that in other foods in the diet.

### Should milk and dairy be included in the diet?

Milk and dairy products can be important in diversifying the diet. They are nutrient dense and provide high quality protein and micronutrients in an easily absorbed form that can benefit both nutritionally vulnerable people and healthy people when consumed in appropriate amounts. It is important to recognise that a combination of food is necessary for a healthy diet and that milk and dairy products are not the only sources of essential nutrients.

### What nutritional role does milk and dairy play in the treatment and prevention of malnutrition?

The critical window for adequate child growth and cognitive development is between conception and 24 months of age and hence many recent international nutrition initiatives focus on the first 1000 days. The components of milk that are thought to be particularly important to supporting child growth are protein, minerals and lactose. Milk-based food products have also been used successfully in the treatment of moderate and severe malnutrition in children. Milk fat contributes about half of the energy in whole milk. Skimmed milk is not recommended as a major food source during the first two years of life because it does not contain essential fatty acids and lacks fat-soluble vitamins.

### Why shouldn't infants (<1yr. age) drink cow milk?

Cow milk does not contain sufficient iron and folate to meet requirements, and animal milks are not recommended for infants younger than 12 months. Consumption of fresh, unheated cow milk by infants prior to 12 months of age is associated with faecal blood loss and lower iron status. Following the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on breastfeeding, most national policies recommend exclusive breastfeeding up to six months of age.

### **What quantity of milk and dairy is recommended?**

There are no global recommendations for milk or dairy consumption. Many countries have developed national dietary guidelines that are based on local food availability, cost, nutritional status, consumption patterns and food habits. Because of differences in these factors, recommendations vary widely. Most countries recommend at least one serving of milk daily, with some countries recommending up to three servings per day. Currently, many national and international bodies recommend consumption of lower-fat dairy foods for developed/high income countries to address problems of overweight and obesity. For the dietary guidelines of various countries see <http://www.fao.org/ag/humannutrition/nutritioneducation/49741/en/>.

### **Is there a link between milk and dairy and obesity?**

The role of milk and dairy products in human health has been increasingly debated in recent years, both in the scientific literature and in popular science literature. Evidence from observational studies does not support the hypothesis that dairy fat contributes to obesity. However, weight gain results from consuming more calories than one expends and consumers should only consume milk and dairy as part of a healthy, balanced diet

### **Is consuming milk and dairy environmentally sustainable?**

Producing, processing and distributing milk and dairy products, like other foods, affects the planet. Dairy production systems are important and complex sources of GHG emissions, notably of methane, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide. Globally, the dairy sector accounts for around four percent of all anthropogenic GHG emissions, of which milk production, processing and transportation account for 2.7 percent. Dairy production systems also contribute to other environmental issues, notably water resource management, through withdrawals, modification of runoff and release of pollutants. Growing and providing food does entail some environmental effects and efforts are ongoing in the dairy sector to reduce the intensity of emissions. Popular interest in these issues is high and is obliging governments and the international community to examine how we can balance our food choices in view of the benefits as well as the risks that they entail – not only for people's health but also for the sustainability of our environment, and the planet at large. This means that both consumers and producers along the food chain will need to work together to make our food safer, healthier and more environmentally sustainable.

### **How is it possible to rebuild links between dairy development and nutrition?**

Governments, development agencies and the private sector all have roles to play. Nutrition-sensitive dairy-industry development is likely to be more effective if it is applied in an environment where there is high-level political commitment and improved nutrition is generally promoted. In developing countries, governments may have a strong role to play by: identifying national nutritional challenges, promoting measurement of nutritional status and providing dietary guidelines. If a strong national nutrition strategy exists, this provides a framework onto which to add a dairy programme.