

Executive Summary

SAFEGUARDING THE HEALTH OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN: The Importance of Dairy Foods in Child Nutrition Programs

In 2009, Congress will have the opportunity to renew the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. Set to expire on September 30, 2009, this legislation allocates funds for federal child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Together, these programs provide nutritional assistance to more than 53 million American adults and children, offering particular advantages for low-income Americans.

The primary objective of the federal child nutrition programs funded by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act is to assist the nation's children and underprivileged adults in meeting their basic nutritional needs in order to protect them from deficiencies that may negatively impact their current and long-term health. By emphasizing the consumption of nutrient-rich foods, such as low-fat and fat-free dairy foods, fruits, vegetables and whole grains – the Food Groups to Encourage – they also help ensure overall diet quality in a manner consistent with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA).

Overall, the federal child nutrition programs that provide dairy as a regular dietary component are succeeding.



The DGA, numerous health organizations and the latest science support the continued role of dairy foods – namely white, flavored and lactose-free milk, cheese and yogurt – as a core component of child nutrition programs as well as WIC and CACFP.

- By integrating the DGA recommendation to provide 3 servings of low-fat and fat-free dairy foods a day for children into the nutrition programs, participating children consume more nutrient-rich diets.
- Optimal nutrition and fitness leads to optimal academic performance. Increased participation in breakfast programs is associated with increased academic test scores among students, improved daily attendance, and better class participation. In addition, physical activity has been linked to better academic performance.

– Milk is nutritionally unique, in that it is a good or excellent source of nine essential nutrients: calcium, potassium, phosphorous, protein, vitamins A, D and B12, riboflavin and niacin (niacin equivalents) and provides three of the five “nutrients of concern” children do not get enough of: calcium, magnesium and potassium. Dairy foods are by far the most significant source of calcium in the US food supply, and they provide nutrients in a package kids enjoy and schools can afford.



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- Offering white or flavored low-fat or fat-free milk is an excellent way to increase milk consumption among children and make their diets more nutritious. According to the DGA, adding a small amount of sugar to nutrient-rich foods such as reduced-fat milk products helps enhance their palatability and improves nutrient intake without adding excessive calories.
- Low-fat and reduced-fat cheeses are nutritious sources of calcium and high quality protein and make other foods more appealing to children.
- Poverty-related malnutrition in early life predisposes underprivileged children to type-2 diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease during adulthood. Dairy foods supply nutrients that may help reduce the risk of these chronic diseases.
- Unlike cow's milk, milk substitute beverages are poor natural sources of calcium, so they must be fortified to be calcium-rich. The calcium in some calcium-fortified soy beverages may not be as well absorbed as the calcium in dairy milk. Soy beverages do not provide the same nutrient package as milk. Furthermore, kids of all ethnicities overwhelmingly choose dairy over soy beverages, because they prefer the taste.
- According to the DGA, if a person wants to consider milk substitute beverages because of lactose intolerance, the most reliable and easiest way to derive the health benefits associated with milk and milk product consumption is to choose alternatives within the milk food group, such as yogurt or lactose-free milk, or to consume the enzyme lactase prior to the consumption of milk products. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has stated that elimination of milk and other dairy products is not usually necessary and avoidance of dairy products may lead to inadequate calcium intake and consequent suboptimal bone mineralization. Natural, hard cheeses, which are low in lactose, including Cheddar and Swiss, are also nutritious calcium-rich options.



The upcoming reauthorization of child nutrition programs can help to safeguard children's health over the short- and long-term by ensuring their nutritional needs are met on a daily basis. And by encouraging the consumption of nutrient-rich foods, including dairy, these programs can continue to improve the overall quality of Americans' diets, potentially reducing the economic and social burden of chronic disease.

