

Dietary fat and dairy: Time for a paradigm shift?

Research is accumulating that dietary fat is not as potentially harmful as once thought, and in fact, some types of fat—olive oil, fish oils and the oils in nuts and seeds—may even be healthy.

Milk fat is one of the most complex naturally occurring fats, containing more than 400 different fatty acids. Although over one-half of the fatty acids in milk fat are saturated, there is consensus that several of these individual fatty acids (such as stearic acid) are neutral in terms of their effects on blood-cholesterol levels.

Recent studies are also finding that dietary fat, particularly animal fat, is not associated with various types of cancer as originally believed, and that some types of fat—alpha-linolenic acid from some oils and omega-3 fatty acids from fish—may actually reduce the risk of some cancers.

This new research fits well with the positive research on dietary patterns such as the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, which focuses on whole foods and patterns of consumption rather than specific dietary components. In addition, awareness that lifestyle factors—such as physical activity, smoking and body weight—play a major role in chronic disease risk helps to broaden the perspective beyond single foods and components.

A dietary-fat paradigm shift would ultimately be good for dairy, especially if consensus was reached that dairy fats are not as detrimental to chronic disease as was once believed. It will take time for health professionals and consumers to change their thinking

about dietary fat. Dairy Council of California will follow this new research and inform our audiences to potentially changing perspectives on dietary fat and milk and milk products.

Positive research continues to abound for dairy and its components

Dairy continues to garner attention for its **weight-management benefits**, with studies showing that those who consume more dairy typically weigh less and those who include dairy during weight-reduction efforts are generally more successful in dropping pounds. The attention has shifted to focus on satiety and appetite regulation, with components in dairy such as casein and whey protein possibly acting to increase satiety between meals and decrease appetite at a subsequent meal.

Milk and dairy products are also getting attention for their apparent ability to reduce the risk of **heart disease, diabetes and metabolic syndrome**. There could be up to a 16 percent reduction for heart disease and stroke and an 8 percent reduction for diabetes in those with high milk or dairy intakes, regardless of fat content. Future research will work to substantiate these initial findings and seek out mechanisms involved.

New evidence that our **aging population** is typically deficient in a number of nutrients brings to light the nutrient density that dairy provides, offering an easy solution without having them rely on supplements. Studies confirm that dairy provides significant contributions to protein and a number of other nutrients needed for successful aging. Vitamin B12, found in significant amounts in dairy, has been shown to slow down cognitive decline in the elderly. There will be more focus

on this population group with research and recommendations aimed at how to live longer, healthier lives.

Research on the health benefits of **probiotics**, generally around immunity and intestinal health, continues to build. New research links consumption of probiotics to lower cholesterol and blood pressure in adults.

Components such as **lactoferrin**, **bioactive peptides** and other factors in milk continue to be studied for their immune-enhancing effects, blood pressure-lowering effects and antimicrobial activities.

Vocal support for vegan diets gains media attention

Some passionate health advocates are supporting vegan diets, which exclude all animal products—not just meat, but milk, butter, eggs and cheese. The publicity these health advocates receive can be widespread, although their claims often lack traditional scientific backing.

Books such as *Building Bone Vitality*—which discounts the positive effect dairy products have on bone health—and movies such as *Food Inc.*—a documentary examining large-scale agricultural food production in the United States—are recent examples. Without careful consideration of dietary choices, there can be nutritional deficiencies resulting from the omission of whole food groups from the diet. The dairy and meat groups are our primary dietary sources of protein, calcium, iron, zinc, magnesium, phosphorus and vitamin D, as well as a number of other nutrients.

Dairy Council of California will continue to partner with credible, science-based groups such as American Dietetic Association and USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion to focus on the

benefits of establishing healthful dietary patterns that include foods from all food groups.

Through our ongoing trends-identification process, Dairy Council of California paints a picture of the environment in which we operate and identifies issues we must address in order to be effective and influential. The trends identified form our annual and long-range operational plans geared at educating the health professional, educator and consumer audiences about the health benefits of dairy products, including the advantages covered in this trends report. □

EDITOR'S NOTE: Produced twice annually by Dairy Council of California, the TRENDS newsletter updates industry leaders on emerging nutrition issues likely to have a positive or negative effect upon the dairy industry. The trends tracking system, monitored by a team of staffers, is designed to identify issues early and track their development through multiple communication channels. Analysis is done biannually on the issues. For more information or to receive a hard copy of the TRENDS newsletter, please contact Kendall House at khouse@dairycouncilofca.org.

