

FOCUS ON SUBSPECIALTIES

Clearing up confusion on role of dairy in children's diets

by **Jatinder J.S. Bhatia, M.D., FAAP**, and **Frank R. Greer, M.D., FAAP**



Dr. Bhatia

Despite statements from the Academy regarding the importance of calcium and dairy products (Greer FR, Krebs NF. *Pediatrics*. 2006;117:578-585) and lactose intolerance (Heyman MB. *Pediatrics*. 2006;118:1279-1286), there appear to be a lot of misconceptions among health care professionals and patients regarding the role of dairy in children's daily diet.

This issue is becoming even more important as we move toward changing choices in school vending machines to provide beverages without caffeine such as low-fat or nonfat milk.

Milk, cheese and yogurt are naturally nutrient-rich foods providing a significant amount of the dietary requirements for calcium, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, vitamins A, B and D as well as protein, which are essential for growth and development.

The AAP clinical report recommends that even children with diagnosed lactose intolerance consume dairy foods to obtain enough nutrients essential for bone health. True lactose intolerance is rare, and even if present, small amounts of dairy such as low-fat milk, aged cheeses or yogurts can be consumed without developing symptoms. Alternatively, lactose-free milk and milk products can be the source of dairy.

Soy beverages are a good source of plant protein but do not deliver



Dr. Greer

the same bioavailability or nutrient package of calcium, other minerals and vitamins A, D and B₁₂, riboflavin and niacin found in milk. Infants, especially premature infants, should not be given soy infant formulas unless there are strict indications or religious choice.

Thus, perceived lactose intolerance sometimes can lead parents to avoid offering milk and other dairy products to infants and children. Such food myths can lead to needless dietary omissions as well as nutritional deficiencies.

Currently, there is no evidence that organic food, including milk, is healthier than regular milk. In fact, the American Dietetic Association finds that organically produced food is not safer or more nutritious than conventionally packaged varieties.

Another issue that often arises is the use of flavored milks that provide the same nutrient package as regular milk. Unflavored milk is lower in sugar than flavored milk. However, given the importance of calcium, vitamin D and other key ingredients in the diet of children and adolescents, flavored milks could be a nice alternative since the contribution of added sugars to the overall diet of young children is minimal.

The role of dairy also is highlighted in the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Dairy is recognized as playing an important role in improving bone health, and some studies have demonstrated that people who consume more dairy products have better overall diets. The guidelines also note that supplements do not offer the benefits of other associated nutrients found in dairy foods.

Dr. Bhatia is a member of the AAP Committee on Nutrition, and Dr. Greer is chair of the committee.