

Dairy Foods and Cancer Risk



This information sheet is about dairy foods and how they influence your cancer risk. It is based on research evidence and has been written for the general public.

Key Messages

Calcium is an important nutrient for bone and dental health, with dairy foods being the major source of dietary calcium in New Zealand. Dairy foods such as milk, yogurt and cheese are good sources of calcium, protein, vitamin A, vitamin B12, magnesium, phosphorous, potassium, riboflavin and zinc.

In terms of cancer risk, dairy foods and calcium have shown both protective and harmful effects. Overall the proven health benefits of dairy foods outweigh the unproven harms.

Dairy foods such as milk, cheese, yoghurt and ice cream are an important part of the diet for most New Zealanders. They provide protein, are the best source of calcium and contain a range of vitamins and minerals.

The calcium in dairy foods is important for strong teeth, and bone strength and density, and is especially important to help prevent osteoporosis. Some research indicates that calcium may help in the prevention of heart disease and in weight management.

Dairy foods and cancer

The relationship between cancer, dairy foods and calcium is not straight forward and is a bit confusing.

Having reviewed all of the available research on dairy foods, calcium and cancer the expert panel of the World Cancer Research Fund came to the following conclusions.

- Milk probably helps protect against bowel cancer.
- There is some evidence that milk may help protect against bladder cancer.
- There is some evidence that cheese may be a cause of bowel cancer.
- Diets high in calcium probably increase the risk of prostate cancer.
- There is some evidence that eating and drinking a lot of milk and dairy products may increase the risk of prostate cancer.

It is too early to be sure about any of these risks and at this stage there doesn't seem to be any reason to limit dairy foods. Overall, because of the essential nutrients they provide dairy products provide more benefit than harm.

The benefits of eating dairy foods

Dairy foods are an important food group for bone and dental health. It is recommended adults have 3 to 4 servings a day.

Calcium is also found in fish with bones that you eat, such as tinned sardines or salmon, fortified soy milk and some dried fruits. For people unable to tolerate dairy foods, calcium is also found in plant foods, green vegetables, nuts and legumes (dried peas and beans). Calcium from these non-dairy foods is not as well absorbed as calcium from dairy foods.

Dairy or other calcium rich foods are especially important for pregnant women, for children

and young people to build bone strength and density, and for women who are at increased risk of osteoporosis.

It is recommended that you choose low fat dairy foods to reduce your fat and saturated fat intake.

What is a serving?

One serve of dairy is:

- 1 cup of milk
- 1 small pottle of yoghurt, dairy food or custard.
- 40g of cheese (match-box sized piece)
- 2 scoops of ice cream.

Non-dairy foods with equivalent amounts of calcium:

- 1 cup calcium fortified soy milk
- 1 cup of almonds
- 6 dried figs or dried apricots
- 5 sardines or ½ cup tinned salmon (with bones).

Ways to include dairy foods in your meals each day

You can include calcium in your diet in many different ways:

- Have a milkshake or smoothie with low fat milk and/or yoghurt and fruit.
- Add low fat yoghurt to breakfast cereal, eat it as snack during the day; use it as a dressing for fruit or vegetable salads; use it as a dip with carrot or celery sticks and low fat crackers; have it instead of cream with cake or desserts; serve with curries or Mexican foods instead of sour cream and with baked potatoes.
- Make white or cheese sauce with low fat milk and a low fat tasty cheese (like parmesan) to serve with vegetables or to use for lasagne, pasta dishes or moussaka.
- Add crumbled feta or blue cheese to salads or mozzarella to pizzas.
- Add small amounts of cheese to salad sandwiches, toasted sandwiches filled with vegetables and stuffed baked potatoes.
- use low fat cream cheese instead of butter on bread and sandwiches.
- drink low fat milk, use it in tea and coffee and all your cooking.