

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, phosphorus, 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 vitamin A and B12, riboflavin, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium and zinc.

The calcium in dairy foods is important for strong teeth, and bone strength and density, especially to help prevent osteoporosis (a bone thinning disease). Some research indicates that calcium may help prevent heart disease and in keeping to a healthy weight.

Dairy foods and cancer

The relationship between cancer, dairy foods and calcium is not clear and can be confusing. Dairy foods seem to give protection for some cancers but increase the risk of getting some others. 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 decisions:

- Milk probably helps protect against bowel cancer but cheese may increase the risk of getting it possibly due to saturated fats.
- Calcium supplements probably protect against bowel cancer but there is not enough evidence to recommend taking calcium supplements.
- Milk may help protect against bladder cancer.
- Drinking and eating a lot of milk and dairy products may increase the risk of prostate cancer.
- Dairy products do not seem to be linked with breast and ovarian cancers.

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 cut down on dairy foods. Overall, because of the essential nutrients they provide. Dairy products provide more benefits than risks.

Should I eat dairy foods?

Dairy foods are important for healthy bone and teeth. It is recommended adults have 3 to 4 servings a day along with a mix of lots of different kinds of foods each day.

For those 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. Calcium is also found in fish with bones that you eat, such as tinned sardines or salmon, fortified soy milk and some dried fruits. Dairy or other calcium rich foods are very important for children and young people to build bone strength and density (thickness), and for women who are more likely to get osteoporosis than men.

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 same amounts of calcium:

- 1 cup calcium fortified (added) 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

Many people do not eat enough calcium. You can include calcium in your meals 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 a 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.