

Is Whole Milk Good for Kid's Health?

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Have you ever been caught in that awkward place where your child wants something to eat, but you're not sure if it's good for them?

Or, confused by the "latest" recommendations for a food that has fluctuated between good for you and bad for you?

Nutrition confusion is a reality for many parents.

Milk, especially, falls prey to confusion amongst consumers. Some of this is due to changing scientific research findings. For example, let's take a look at whole milk.

When my kids were born, it was advised that children drink whole milk for the first 5 years of life. Now, things are different. Due to its fat content, it's advised to change to a lower fat milk at the age of two.

Views on whole milk may be changing yet again. Some of the emerging science is revealing potential benefits.

Milk Recommendations for Children

Milk is a source of concentrated nutrition, including calories, protein, fat, and nine essential nutrients. From age one to two years, the amount of fat found in whole milk is considered beneficial to brain development and overall growth.

But after age two, organizations such as the [American Heart Association \(AHA\)](#) and the [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) recommend parents transition their children to lower fat milk (2% or 1%) to ensure normal weight gain and optimal heart health.

If older children carry extra weight, the recommendation is to lower the fat content of milk even further, to 1% or skim milk.

Yet, there may be health advantages to whole milk, not only for children, but for adults, too.

Let's start with adults.

Heart Health and Whole Milk

A 2018 multi-national prospective study looked at dietary intake of whole fat and low-fat milk, yogurt and cheese in adults aged 35-70 years, from 21 different countries.¹

Researchers measured cardiovascular events including non-fatal myocardial infarction (MI), stroke, or heart failure, and found that dairy consumption was associated with a lower risk of death and major heart disease events.

In other words, consuming dairy – even full fat milk – was associated with lower risk of cardiac events. The benefit was seen with consuming at least 1 serving of milk or yogurt per day.

Whole Milk Research and Children

Other studies have looked at the fat content of milk, specifically whole milk, and found promising outcomes for satiety, weight status, and vitamin D status in children.

For example, a 2016 study out of Canada, looked at the consumption of whole milk in kids aged 1 to 6 years.² They found that kids who consumed whole milk had higher vitamin D levels than those who consumed low fat milk. These kids also had lower body fat than the kids who drank 1% milk.

Furthermore, the kids who drank 1% milk had to drink nearly 3 cups of milk to get similar vitamin D levels to the kids who drank 1 cup of whole milk.

Another 2017 study looked at very heavy 3-year-olds. Researchers found that these children were unlikely to drink milk at all, but those who did, drank skim milk. Some toddlers did drink whole milk and their odds for developing severe obesity was lower.³

Still, another 2013 study showed 2- to 4- year- old children who drank 2% or whole milk had lower body fat compared to same age children who drank skim or 1% milk.⁴ Other studies have shown similar conclusions around higher fat content of milk resulting in lower body fat, even in older children and teens.⁵

We don't have lots of research on the topic of whole milk in kids, however, it's important to note that some earlier studies show little to no impact of whole milk on weight status or vitamin D levels.

The Rationale Behind Whole Milk Benefits

Why is whole milk associated with lower body fat and higher vitamin D status in kids?

Satiety, or a sense of fullness, may be a reason whole milk has a positive impact on body fat and weight in children. Fat is a nutrient involved in satiety (encouraging a sense of fullness). It may simply contribute to fullness, leading a child to eat less.

Vitamin D, on the other hand, is a fat-soluble vitamin, which means it needs fat to be absorbed in the body. Researchers postulate that the fat content of whole milk makes vitamin D absorption easier for the body.

If you're still wondering about whole milk and where it might fit into your child's diet, let's review a few things.

Milk is good nutrition

Milk, in general, is a powerhouse for nutrition. You get a bang for your nutritional "buck" when any type of milk is included in the diet. In a single cup, milk provides 9 essential nutrients including protein, fat, calcium, vitamin D, vitamin A, potassium and more.

The added benefits described above are a bonus!

Whole milk tastes good

A lot of what kids eat and drink is based on food's flavor. Simply put, if they don't enjoy the flavor, they are less likely to eat it. If your child enjoys whole milk (or 2%, 1%, or skim), then he's more likely to drink it.

(If your child cannot consume dairy milk due to milk allergy or intolerance, be sure to check out my video about alternatives and read my perspective about milk alternatives.)

Whole milk can be part of a healthy food balance

You can rest assured that in the presence of a wholesome, balanced diet, full fat milk can be a nutritious addition. The key is balance.

If your family eats a high fat diet, including fried foods, dining out, and frequent indulgences like dessert, you'll want to scale back on the total fat in the diet. That's not an ideal way of eating for anyone.

Alternatively, if your family eats fruits and vegetables, lean protein sources, and whole grains, you have more room for whole milk and full fat dairy products.

In my home, I stock whole milk and full fat yogurt. I happen to enjoy the flavor and my kids do, too.

Whole milk has other advantages

Whole milk may be useful for growing teens, too. During adolescence when growth is in high gear, whole milk can offer a concentrated source of nutrition and calories, helping teens meet their higher nutritional requirements.

Additionally, in children who struggle with picky eating or who are underweight, whole milk and full fat dairy products can offer valuable nutrition for nutrient intake, weight gain and growth.

References

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Additional Resources:

AHA statement: <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/nutrition-basics/dairy-products-milk-yogurt-and-cheese>

AAP statement: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Milk-Allergy-Foods-and-Ingredients-to-Avoid.aspx>

