

Udder Confusion

The controversy over the role milk plays in weight loss

By Conal Darcy

Milk—that pasteurized, homogenized, and institutionalized dietary mainstay—has always been linked with strong bones and healthy smiles. But that's not all. A recent study has shown a possible link between weight loss and regular consumption of dairy, though this theory has recently come under fire, leaving consumers without a clear picture of the role dairy plays in a healthy diet.

A study conducted by Dr. Michael Zemel of the University of Tennessee found that participants who consumed three to four servings of dairy per day burned more calories than those with a lower dairy intake. The study states that you can shed up to 10 pounds in a year purely through regularly consuming dairy products.

The main claim of the study is that calcium, in conjunction with other biological agents found in milk, causes the body to metabolize fat more efficiently,

preventing obesity and managing weight.

Naturally, marketers have taken these findings and run with them. Purveyors of dairy foods, through industry groups such as the National Dairy Council, have rallied behind these claims, touting the health benefits of milk in a \$100 million advertising campaign, much to the consternation of health advocates and nutritionists.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), a nonprofit group that advocates a strict vegan diet, filed two major lawsuits last year. The purpose of these suits, in which Kraft Foods, the National Dairy Council, Dannon, and others were named as defendants, is to halt the advertising campaign, which the PCRM maintains is based on spurious evidence and makes false claims.

There may be some merit to this suit, though the devil is in the details. Most of the advertising maintains that dairy *alone* can lower weight and prevent

obesity. While this could be rationally derived from the study's findings, it may not be totally correct. Participants in the original study were maintaining a healthy diet with normal caloric intakes, the only accounted variable being their dairy consumption.

That those who ate dairy lost weight versus those who didn't reveals correlation, but not causation. The participants who ate dairy may have been more prone to exercising or eating healthier foods. Three to four servings of dairy is the recommended daily allowance put forth by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). If they followed these guidelines, it is reasonable to think they followed the other recommendations as well, meaning they had a healthier diet than their counterparts.

It is difficult to pull an accurate, single-sentence conclusion from a complex trial of this nature, especially when only one study has been conducted. This has not deterred the milk industry, however. The results are generalized statements about a single study written in conspicuous lettering on some dairy products, public infighting among nutritionists, and general confusion for consumers.

Other studies have come out since Zemel's that claim the very opposite of his claims. A recent Harvard's Health Professionals Follow-up Study, led by Dr. Swapni N. Rajpathak, found that in 43,000 adult males, increased dairy did not increase weight loss, with all other factors being equal. Other studies found that dairy can even *increase* weight gain, especially if you consume more than the recommended amount.

This controversy is reminiscent of the egg-cholesterol debate from a decade ago. One study found eggs were harmful, followed by another study proclaiming the benefits of their protein content, followed by another refuting *those* claims. The main difference this time around is the sensitive subject of weight control, a



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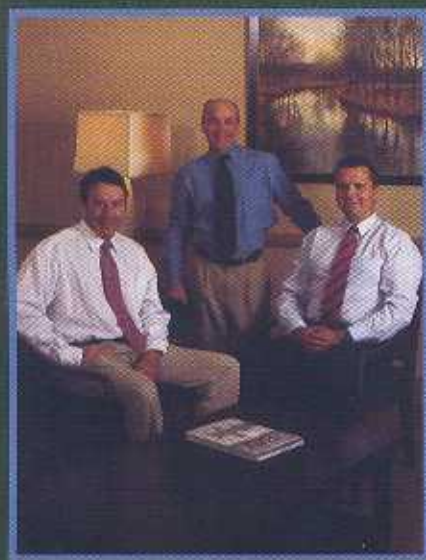


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lightning rod in these times of widespread obesity and diabetes among adults and children.

So what to believe? It's hard to say right now. Zemel's study was peer-reviewed and it was seemingly conducted without bias; but valid immutable conclusions cannot be drawn from it just yet. Results that refute years of common thinking need to be examined closely, and more controlled studies are needed, before such claims are plastered on the side of yogurt cartons. Otherwise, consumers can get the false impression that eating dairy means they can eat anything else, too.

The truth is there is no magic bullet when it comes to weight loss. Drinking three glasses of milk a day while maintaining a high-fat, high-calorie diet will not result in a slimmer waist. The only truly effective way of staying fit and shedding pounds is to permanently change your diet. A healthy balance of all the food groups, including low-fat dairy products, in unison with regular exercise, will mean a leaner, fitter you. ■

Got Dairy?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, different age groups need different amounts of dairy. This chart can guide you.

	Age	Recommended Amount
Children	2-8 years	2 cups*
Girls	9-18 years	3 cups
Boys	9-18 years	3 cups
Women	19-50 years	3 cups
	51+ years	3-4 cups
Men	19-50 years	3 cups
	51+ years	3-4 cups

*1 cup = 1 cup of milk or yogurt, 1½ ounces of natural cheese, or 2 ounces of processed cheese.

Source: United States Department of Agriculture
The USDA has recently revised its food pyramid. To get your own personalized healthy diet and tips on how to maintain it, check out www.mypyramid.gov.