

Low Fat Milk

According to a new report from the Department of Agriculture (USDA), nearly 80 percent of students in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) chose low-fat or fat-free milk in 2005, compared to less than 30 percent in the early 1990s.

Unpublished data from USDA's third School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA) shows most schools voluntarily follow the recommendation, which was also outlined in the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA) to encourage more consumption of low-fat and fat-free dairy. The current DGA recommends three servings of dairy every day for most Americans.

Since 1992, students have independently followed the trend toward selection of lower-fat milks. In the 1992 assessment, 28.6 percent of students who drank milk chose either low-fat or fat-free milk, while the latest SNDA data shows that 79.2 percent of milk-drinking students now choose low-fat or fat-free milk -- a more than 175 percent increase.

The study also revealed that consumption changed among flavored milk drinkers. In 1992, the most popular milk among flavored milk drinkers was 2%. Today, the majority of flavored milk drinkers now consume low-fat or fat-free milk in schools. The number of schools offering whole milk is relatively low and more schools now offer low-fat milk options.

According to the DGA, small amounts of sugars added to nutrient-rich foods, such as low-fat and fat-free dairy foods, may increase consumption of these foods by enhancing the taste, so overall nutrient intake is improved without contributing excessive calories. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that children who drink either flavored or plain milk consume more nutrients and have a lower or comparable body mass index (BMI) than children who don't drink milk.

Dairy foods are nutrient-rich and provide a significant source of vitamins and minerals. In fact, dairy foods offer a unique nutrient package of nine essential nutrients – calcium, potassium, phosphorus, protein, vitamins A, D and B12, riboflavin and niacin. The DGA identified low-fat and fat-free milk and dairy foods as a "Food Group to Encourage" because they provide three of the five nutrients most children's diets are lacking – calcium, magnesium and potassium.

Health professionals support the consumption of milk, cheese and yogurt as being critical for growing children, adolescents and teens who are building bone mass and developing lifelong habits. In addition, many children are overweight, yet undernourished and miss out on calcium, magnesium, potassium and vitamin D. It is now more important than ever for children to drink milk with meals, at home and at school, to get the nutrients they need.

Since the overwhelming majority of children do not consume the DGA's recommended three servings of low-fat or fat-free milk or dairy foods per day, increasing children's consumption of milk to recommended levels can be a key to improving diet quality. The Southeast Dairy Association works with schools across the Southeast to help promote more consumption of all food groups to encourage, including low-fat and fat-free dairy, whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

For more information on the health benefits of dairy foods, visit www.southeastdairy.org or for more information on SNA, visit www.SchoolNutrition.org.

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