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**FAMILY AND  
CONSUMER SCIENCES**

# THE POWER OF DAIRY FOODS

The beginning of a new year is a great time to set some personal goals. Your goals could be developing a financial plan, setting aside designated family time or taking steps toward better health. If you are going to focus on better health, take note of the power of dairy foods.

Dairy is an important component of a healthy diet, said Diana Romano, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension assistant specialist.

"The amount of dairy foods you need to eat depends on your age and it can vary between 2 and 3 cups each day, and even more if you're very physically active," Romano said. "Typically, 1 cup of milk, yogurt or calcium fortified soymilk; 1.5 ounces of natural cheese or 2 ounces of processed cheese is considered a cup from the dairy group. When choosing dairy products, fat free and low fat are good options."

However, not all dairy products are created equal. Milk and many foods made from milk retain their calcium content, including yogurt and cheese. Foods made from milk that have little to no calcium, such as cream cheese, cream and butter, are not part of the dairy group.

Romano said consuming dairy products provides numerous health benefits, especially improved bone health.

"Foods in the dairy group provide nutrients that are vital for health and maintenance of your body," she said. "These nutrients include calcium, potassium, vitamin D and protein. Calcium is used for building bones and teeth and maintaining bone mass. Dairy products are the primary source of calcium in American diets, and consuming 3 cups, or the equivalent, of dairy products can improve bone mass, which is vital as we age."

Romano reminds us that diets rich in potassium may help to maintain healthy blood pressure, and foods such as yogurt, cheese, fluid milk and calcium fortified soymilk, provide this much needed nutrient.

In addition, consumers also can find vitamin D in dairy products. Vitamin D helps the body maintain proper levels of calcium and phosphorous, which helps build and maintain bones. Milk and soymilk fortified with vitamin D are good sources of this nutrient, along with yogurt and ready to eat breakfast cereals.

"Keep in mind milk is a great source of high quality protein, with an average of 8 grams per cup. Compare that to nondairy milk alternatives that typically have 1 gram or less of protein per cup," she said. "Also, as you read the label, keep in mind the sugar listed is not added; rather it's the naturally occurring lactose found in cows' milk."

So, not only are dairy products tasty, those that contain calcium are linked to improved bone health, especially in children and adolescents. Also, consuming these products may reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

To be even more health conscious, switch to fat free or low fat dairy foods as a way to cut down on the consumption of saturated fats and cholesterol. Romano said consuming foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol can have lasting health implications.

"Diets high in saturated fats raise the LDL cholesterol levels in the blood. High LDL increases the risk for coronary heart disease," she said. "To help keep blood cholesterol levels healthy, limit the amount of saturated fats consumption. Also, high intake of fats makes it easy to consume more calories than needed."



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