

HOARD'S DAIRYMAN

Expanding Dairy's Role in Nutrition: The Latest Dietary Guidelines and Whole Milk in Schools

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Recent headlines have celebrated major milestones for the dairy community and for public health, with new Dietary Guidelines for

Americans and measures that will allow schools to offer 2% and whole milk. Decades of dairy checkoff-supported research alongside independent third-party science continue to help advance the understanding of nutrition provided by dairy foods like milk, yogurt and cheese across a range of fat levels. This research was shared as part of the public process to inform those who determine healthy eating patterns for Americans.

Dairy in the Dietary Guidelines

Dairy maintains its own food group in the latest Dietary Guidelines, which recommend three servings of dairy foods daily. These guidelines set standards for federal nutrition assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC and school meal initiatives. Dairy's nutrient-rich package including protein, calcium, vitamin D and potassium, remains central to recommendations aimed at improving health across all life stages.

One major exciting update is the inclusion of nutrient-dense dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt across all fat levels. This expansion of options gives Americans more ways to meet their nutritional needs and personal preferences as part of a healthy diet. The Guidelines also reflect consumer behavior, acknowledging a desire for balance and more variety to deliver on individualized health goals.

Whole Milk in Schools

The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act permits schools in the National School Lunch Program to offer a broadened range of milk options including 2% and whole milk. The legislation also exempts milk fat from being included in the saturated fat limitations schools must follow, which offers additional flexibility.

It is important to note this is not a mandate for schools to serve whole milk but rather it gives them the option to make it available. This choice will be based on operational factors such as cost, product availability and student preferences.

Piloting Whole & Reduced-Fat Milk in Schools

Equipping school nutrition professionals with information will be essential to supporting the decision to add higher-fat milk options. National Dairy Council is running pilot programs to assess how whole and 2% milk are received in schools. The pilots, coordinated with dairy processors and local partners, will measure student selection, participation rates, and milk waste, which will help assess the opportunities for broader adoption. Results are expected by the end of 2026, just in time to support schools as they plan milk options for the next school year.

Milk is an important source of nutrients that many children don't get enough of, like calcium, vitamin D, and potassium. With most students consuming the majority of their dairy at school, offering a variety of milk options, including higher-fat milk, may encourage better nutrition and higher participation in school meal programs.

These recent changes mark a new chapter for more dairy choices to help nourish Americans. With the Dietary Guidelines including dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt at all fat levels and schools gaining flexibility to offer whole and reduced-fat milk, the dairy community is poised to help nourish a wider range of tastes and wellness needs.