

Serving Flavored Milk in Schools

Flavored milk in schools: Ban it or keep it?

Many school boards and PTAs are embroiled in discussions about whether to remove chocolate milk from cafeterias. On the surface, the argument against flavored milk is logical; in a time when about 20 percent of America's children and teenagers are obese, added sugar to anything is justifiably scrutinized.

But the allegation that flavored milk contributes to obesity is factually incorrect. The opposite is actually the case: milk drinkers, even those that consume flavored milk, tend to weigh less, not more. According to a study published in 2008 in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, kids who drank milk were less likely to be overweight. This finding holds true no matter which flavor of milk kids consumed.

No flavored milk, or no milk?

Schools that have removed flavored milk have seen a sharp decline in milk consumption, which is bad news for kids' nutrition since milk contains nine essential nutrients and three nutrients that American children tend to under-consume: calcium, potassium and vitamin D.

The Milk Processors Education Program conducted a nationwide study to determine the impact of dropping flavored milk from school cafeterias. The study included 58 school districts, four of which are in California. The participating schools had independently decided to stop serving flavored milk.

The study found that total milk consumption dropped an average of 35 percent when flavored milk was eliminated. Consumption dropped because fewer students were selecting milk and

more milk was thrown away. Schools saw a 23 percent drop in the amount of milk sold.

It was assumed that the removal of flavored milk would cause an initial decline in milk consumption followed by a fairly quick rise in plain milk consumption once students adapt. But the data tells a different story: two years after flavored milk was removed, consumption continued at the lower level.

Where's the calcium?

It's a little known fact that nine out of ten girls and seven out of ten boys currently do not get enough calcium in their diets. With life expectancy on the rise in the U.S., osteoporosis has become of greater concern among older Americans. Food decisions that kids make today, will impact their future health later in life. And we're seeing consequences of lower bone mineral density early in life, as well: children and adolescents today are more likely to break a bone than their parents were.

Some argue that the nutrients lost when kids stop drinking milk can be replaced by other food sources. But to replace all the nutrients from one serving of flavored milk, schools would need to provide two ounces of cheese, one medium egg, one cup of fortified orange juice and a half cantaloupe over the course of a week. That adds up to a lot of extra calories and cost!

Eliminating excess sugar from kids' diets is a worthwhile goal. The added sugar in flavored milk is miniscule (less than 3% of a kid's daily sugar intake). We need to place the focus on what makes the most difference to a child's overall health. Flavored milk offers a practical way of ensuring that kids get all the nutrients they need, even if it takes a few more grams of sugar to do it.

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“Members of the school district’s PTA were adamantly opposed to offering chocolate milk in the cafeterias, claiming it was as bad as soda,” said Hanks.

And after the study, the district resumed providing chocolate milk, Hanks said.

To measure what was tossed out, the students poured the milk into containers. That total was compared with waste measures from 15 other elementary schools where milk waste had been measured.

Among the changes that might also affect school lunch participation was a move from a five-week to a four-week cycle of meal rotations. Some “bonus” foods, such as cookies and crackers, pickles and whipped toppings, also had been removed. And a vegetable side dish was added every day. A full-price lunch rose 25 cents from \$2.25 over the two years too.

Beverage choices also included bottled water and juice.

On the milk question, eliminating chocolate milk means an average decrease of 8 grams of sugar and 37 calories in a student’s lunch; the trade-off is 1 gram of protein and 5 percentage points in the daily recommended intake of calcium, the researchers said. In addition, the researchers noted that their study did not account for whether students compensated for what they didn’t get with milk by eating or drinking other things, either in or after school.

Future research, they said, could consider “how behavioral nudges and triggers that preserve options, such as chocolate milk, and guide students to more healthful choices could lead students to take, and eat, healthier lunches.”

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