

Star-Telegram

Term 'milk' has more to do with color, consistency than nutrition

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If you've strolled past the dairy case lately, you might have noticed that it has grown to ranch-size proportions. Dozens of products labeled "milk," and they spill over onto the nonrefrigerated shelves.

Gone are the days when selecting a carton of milk was simple: whole or skim.

Just look at the choices. Low-fat hemp milk for your cornflakes? Omega-3 organic in your coffee? How about some grass-fed goat milk?

For their part, milk producers are not happy with all the beverages that call themselves "milk" on shelves. The nation's dairy farmers asked the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to require nondairy products to be labeled something other than "milk."

"We're not saying products that come from grains, seeds, nuts and so on shouldn't be on the shelves, only that they be labeled 'milk' or 'imitation milk,'" says Chris Galen, spokesman for the National Milk Producers Federation. (The federation has a Facebook page devoted to the effort, called "They Don't Got Milk.")

A spokesman for the Texas Association of Dairy Farmers says that although he doesn't see the proliferation of "milk" products as a positive development, he tries to look on the bright side. "It's almost like flattery -- they want to be related to the natural goodness of milk. Milk alone has it," Darren Turley says.

Meanwhile, the FDA recently responded to the milk producers federation with a letter saying that the agency is currently focusing its efforts elsewhere.

In any case, for consumers, sorting through the health claims is enough to make you feel cowed. You could spend a whole morning reading labels.

We've taken a look at 11 popular "milk" beverages. We've noted their major ingredients, whether they're a dairy product, calorie count, calcium, cholesterol, price and what registered dietitians have to say about them.

Notes: Prices are per half-gallon except where noted and may vary by store. Brand names used for this story are indicated in parentheses. "RDA" means recommended daily allowance, as outlined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Almond milk (Blue Diamond)

Major ingredients: Filtered water, almonds

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 40

Calcium RDA: 20 percent

Cholesterol: 0 milligrams

Price: \$2

Dietitian says: The calcium is added, as opposed to occurring naturally as in dairy products and is not as well-absorbed by the body. This applies to most nondairy milks.

Coconut milk (So Delicious, unsweetened)

Major ingredients: Coconut, water, guar gum

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 50

Calcium RDA: 10 percent

Cholesterol: 0 milligrams

Price: \$2

Dietitian says: Coconuts are a good source of electrolytes -- potassium, magnesium and sodium. Check the label in case the s content is high.

Fat-free calcium-enriched for the lactose-intolerant (Lactaid)

Major ingredients: Milk, lactase enzyme

Dairy? Yes

Calories per 8 ounces: 90

Calcium RDA: 50 percent

Cholesterol: Fewer than 5 milligrams

Price: \$3.69

Dietitian says: Helpful for those who suffer from lactose intolerance, which may increase with age.

Fat-free with no rBGH or rBST hormones (Promised Land)

Major ingredient: Milk

Dairy? Yes

Calories per 8 ounces: 90

Calcium RDA: 35 percent

Cholesterol: Fewer than 5 milligrams

Price: \$3.69

Dietitian says: Both rBGH and rBST are growth hormones; some herds are injected to boost milk production. This makes no di nutritionally. All milk has some of these hormones; cows produce them naturally. Some generic or house-brand milks also are pr without added hormones.

Goat milk, 1 percent (Meyenberg)

Major ingredient: Goat milk

Dairy? Yes

Calories per 8 ounces: 100

Calcium RDA: 30 percent

Cholesterol: 10 milligrams

Price: \$3.49

Dietitian says: Despite claims, it's unlikely to ease intolerance, as goat's milk is nutritionally very similar to cow's milk.

Hemp milk (Living Harvest Tempt, unsweetened)

Major ingredients: Filtered water, shelled hemp seed

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 70

Calcium RDA: 30 percent

Cholesterol: None

Price: \$3.99

Dietitian says: Label says "3,700 mg with GLA" and "1,100 mg with SDA." GLA and SDA are the fatty acids that when broken provide the good omega-3.

Lactose-free rice milk (Rice Dream)

Major ingredients: Water, brown rice, oleic safflower or other oils; vitamin B-12

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 120

Calcium RDA: 30 percent

Cholesterol: None

Price: \$2.39

Dietitian says: Vitamin B-12 is important in metabolism and producing energy, and in preventing anemia. It's found only in animals so vegans would benefit from using a B-12-fortified milk.

Non-GMO soy milk (Silk)

Major ingredients: Soybeans, filtered water

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 100

Calcium RDA: 30 percent

Cholesterol: None

Price: \$2.69

Dietitian says: GMO stands for "genetically modified organism," so this product comes from soybeans whose DNA hasn't been altered by human engineering. It doesn't make a huge difference one way or the other, nutritionally. When soybeans are modified, it's to increase crop yield. However, some people definitely object to GMOs from an environmental or agricultural standpoint.

Organic oat milk (Pacific Natural Foods)

Major ingredients: Filtered water, organic oat groats, oat bran

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 130

Calcium RDA: 30 percent

Cholesterol: None

Price: \$2.99

Dietitian says: A groat is the full oat kernel before it's smashed flat to make oatmeal.

Soy organic, nonrefrigerated (WestSoy)

Major ingredients: Filtered water, organic soybeans; 46 milligrams isoflavones

Dairy? No

Calories per 8 ounces: 90

Calcium RDA: 4 percent

Cholesterol (milligrams): None

Price: \$2.39

Dietitian says: There's pretty solid evidence that isoflavones are good for us. It's said that they help counteract hot flashes and ameliorate some of estrogen's damage in the body, but how much effect they have on hormones is open to question.

1 percent designed for children (Borden Plus Kid Builder)

Major ingredients: Milk, calcium, vitamins

Dairy? Yes

Calories per 8 ounces: 130

Calcium RDA: 40 percent

Cholesterol: 10 milligrams

Price: \$2.75

Dietitian says: Milk is usually the No. 1 source for children's calcium, so this is a good nutrition package. Adults could benefit from it too -- most of them aren't getting enough calcium.

What dietitians

are saying

We asked two dietitians about milk and your health. Here are answers from Emily Haeussler, a Fort Worth nutrition counselor, and Sandon, who is an assistant professor of clinical nutrition at UT Southwestern Medical School-Dallas and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. Both women are registered dietitians.

Any truth to the idea that cow's milk isn't good for people?

Reliable research doesn't support this idea, Sandon says.

Does drinking milk increase congestion in the nasal passages?

"Some pediatricians say yes, but some research says milk doesn't increase mucous secretion," Haeussler says.

Why are some dairy milk products sold on unrefrigerated store shelves? Won't they spoil?

No. The milk has been ultra-pasteurized, says Sandon, meaning heated to a very high temperature for a short time, so "there's no living bacteria in it to become rancid or sour." This type of milk has been sold in Europe for years, but it's a fairly new phenomenon in the U.S. One brand offers three 8-ounce cartons of organic 2 percent for \$3.99. "It's the milk industry's way of competing with soda and juice boxes" for space in lunch bags, Sandon says. But even this type of milk must be refrigerated after the container is opened.

Why can't some people tolerate cow's milk?

Two big reasons, says Sandon: lactose intolerance and milk allergy. About 2 to 3 percent of the population has an immune-system reaction to milk. They may develop a rash, respiratory trouble or gastrointestinal problems like diarrhea or constipation. An alternative such as soy milk can work for them, although Sandon points out that a large number of people are allergic to soy.

Lactose intolerance is different, and is caused by a lack of the lactase enzyme which is essential for digestion of lactose, the sugar in milk.

How many people are lactose-intolerant?

"It's hard to get at," Sandon says. Some people have the problem only sometimes, she says.

"Older adults sometimes lose the ability to tolerate. It may be a natural product of aging," Sandon says.

People of any age who aren't accustomed to consuming milk may not produce as much lactase as if they drank milk regularly, s

"Some can tolerate small amounts with other foods, but not milk by itself."

Milk such as Lactaid, with lactase enzymes added, can help the lactose-intolerant, Sandon says.

Should people with lactose intolerance drink "raw" milk?

The term means the milk hasn't been pasteurized to kill germs, Sandon says. Many people who are otherwise lactose-intolerant they can tolerate raw milk.

"There might be some reason -- maybe the bacteria in the milk help to break down lactose -- but I don't recommend this because potential for food-borne illness is higher, and for this reason it can't be sold across state lines," Sandon says. "Most health professionals say the trend toward unpasteurized dairy products isn't good. There was a reason, 50 or 60 years ago, that we started pasteurizing. That reason is the potential for illnesses caused by E. coli and salmonella."

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