

health **smarts**

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Dairy In Your Diet

Dairy is often considered a healthy food group and one that should be included in our daily diet, but it does come with a number of drawbacks.



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On the plus side, dairy is high in calcium, vitamin D and protein, which all support healthy, strong bones. This is important if you have spinal-cord injury or disease (SCI/D) because you're at a higher risk of osteoporosis.

However, there are also some potential problems to consider when talking about dairy.

Lactose Allergies

Firstly, one of the main sugars found in dairy products is lactose.

An estimated 65-75% of the world's population has some degree of lactose intolerance whereby they lack lactase, the enzyme required to digest lactose.

Those who have lactose intolerance can experience a number of adverse effects including bloating, stomach cramps, flatulence and vomiting. People with SCI/D often experience similar digestive issues and suffer from neu-

rogenic bowel. Consuming dairy can make these issues worse.

Dairy is one of the top five foods people are allergic to, along with wheat, nuts, corn and soy. Allergies create inflammation in the body, and those with SCI/D tend to have low systemic inflammation in their bodies.

A study at Brock University in Canada put a group of individuals on an anti-inflammatory diet and this included removing dairy. The results showed reduced pain, better sleep and better mood, and some individuals noticed weight loss.

Secret Sugars

There are also often hidden sugars in dairy products such as flavored milks and yogurts.

An 8-ounce glass of chocolate milk contains about 16 grams of added sugar, which is more than half of the 25-gram daily limit suggested by the World Health Organization.

However, that limit may even be less for individuals with SCI/D since they have difficulties with carbohydrate metabolism and glucose intolerance.

Excessive sugar intake contributes to weight gain as well as insulin resistance that can lead to Type 2 diabetes. Sugar is also inflammatory in the body, and it can negatively impact pain and cognitive functioning.

What About Non-Fat?

Don't be fooled by non-fat dairy products as a healthy alternative either.

Although the fat has been removed, often sugar has taken its place to help maintain flavor. Also, non-fat options deprive you of certain fat-soluble vitamins, including vitamins A, D, E and K, that are contained in full-fat versions. These nutrients are important for immune and bone health, which are important if you have SCI/D.

Organic vs. Non-Organic

Another area to watch is when it comes to organic and non-organic dairy products.

Non-organic dairy comes from the milk of animals that have been raised in concentrated animal feeding operations. There is concern over these animals being regularly given pharmaceuticals such as man-made hormones that induce milk production.

There is also worry that non-organic dairy products are highly likely contaminated with pesticides, particularly organophosphates. A



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study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that children with higher levels of organophosphate by-products in their urine had a greater likelihood of having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Grass-Fed Benefits

A 2014 article in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* by dietician Leslie Beck noted that milk from grass-fed cows has five times more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) than conventional milk.

A fatty acid found in dairy and beef, CLA is linked to protection from colorectal and breast cancers, diabetes and heart disease. This is important to note since people with SCI/D are at a higher risk of cancer.



Studies show that milk from grassfed cows has several health benefits.

Another potential benefit is found in the amount of good fatty acids. A 2013 study published in the journal PLOS One found organic milk contained 25% less of the damaging pro-inflammatory omega-6 fats and 62% more of the beneficial anti-inflammatory omega-3 fats than conventional milk.

Healthier Alternatives

So now that you've read some of the research about the pros and cons of dairy, here are a few options:

- An alternative to animal milk is one of the many plant milk options that are available such as almond, cashew, hemp and rice milk.
- If you want to reduce your dairy intake but are concerned about getting enough calcium, try plant-based foods such as kale, broccoli, almonds, sesame seeds, parsley and walnuts.
- Try organic, unflavored dairy products and add your own natural



sweeteners such as berries, honey, vanilla, cinnamon or cocoa nibs.

- Switch to lactose-free dairy products to see if you notice a difference in your digestion.

For more information, visit eatwelllivewellwithsci.com.

Kylie James, CNP, and Joanne Smith, CNP, are co-authors of the Paralyzed Veterans of America-supported book Eat Well, Live Well with Spinal Cord Injury. ■

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