

A fresh look at dairy fat and health

Earlier in the year, I wrote in this newsletter about ongoing research on the impact of dairy foods in the UK diet on human health and on the environment. Much of the research was being undertaken at Food Production and Quality Research Division of Reading University and funded jointly Dairy Council, DairyCo and Dairy UK. The large scale Reading study had been investigating the effect fat and saturated fats in milk have on cholesterol and cardiovascular disease (CVD), one of the leading causes of death in humans.

A recent conference, hosted by the Dairy Council and DairyCo, took a fresh look at the evidence on saturated fatty acids, dairy and cardiometabolic risk. It emphasised that the current guidelines on saturated fat are not conclusive. The guidelines were first introduced many decades ago and the industry's understanding of saturated fat has since moved on. Current research suggests that saturated fatty acids may not all behave in the same way when it comes to contributing to cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. As Dr Anne Mullen, Director of Nutrition at the Dairy Council, pointed out, "it is crucial that we consider all of the work that has been published to date in order to re-assess how we understand this complex relationship, particularly with regards to the effects of dairy foods and beverages".

Nutritionists and scientists from home and overseas reported the findings of recent research. Some studies have shown that there is no relationship between saturated fat intake and cardiovascular disease, whilst others have suggested that milk and dairy products have either a neutral or beneficial effect on cardiovascular health and type 2 diabetes. Furthermore, milk and dairy consumption has been associated with reducing hypertension and lowering blood pressure and vascular function. The role of calcium is perhaps better understood as it is linked to beneficial lipid effects.

There is currently concern here in the UK amongst health workers and medics over the trend in children and young adults, especially women, to reduce the intake of dairy foods, often in an attempt to lose weight. Observational studies from Copenhagen have shown that the intake of dairy is inversely associated with body fat, and there is no difference between high versus low fat dairy.

Speakers at this gathering accepted that the nutrients of milk and dairy are important and integral to our diets. Dr Mullen argued that it is the nutritious nature of milk and dairy, and the physical make-up of the foods, that produce a neutral or protective effect on cardiometabolic risk. It is clear that new guidelines on saturated fat are urgently needed, but will require large scale studies to characterise individual fats in relation to disease risk.

In the minds of most UK consumers, the links between milk, diet and health have been influenced for many decades more by myth than science. This current research is beginning to root out the facts. But, there is always a *but*, the key to changing behaviour is to get positive messages across to consumers and of importantly, educators.

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