

Dairy makes a difference

Dairy makes a difference, linked to sustainability, was the theme of a recent London conference hosted by the Dairy Council, DairyCo and Dairy UK. Speakers from those three organisations, some from Reading University and ADAS, presented findings of an ongoing joint research project funded by the conference hosts. The research involves investigating the impact of dairy foods in the UK diet on human health and on the environment. There were some encouraging outcomes for the dairy industry, but also some areas of concern.

Readers of this newsletter won't need reminding that milk is one of the most nutritionally complete foods available, yet there are many myths that blame milk and dairy foods for a variety of ailments, without any science to support them. This large scale Reading study has been investigating the effect fat and saturated fats in milk have on cholesterol and cardiovascular disease (CVD). It was pointed out that CVD is one of the leading causes of death in humans with treatment costs amounting to over £9.5bn, or 6% of total UK healthcare expenditure.

The encouraging news is that in spite of all the myths, the project has shown that, whilst milk and dairy products do contribute to the nation's overall intake of saturated fat, there is much evidence to suggest that dairy consumption may reduce the risk of CVD. However, it should be pointed out that the reasons why saturated fat from milk and dairy may not exert the usual effects of saturated fat are not yet fully understood. The Dairy Council and DairyCo have now convened a group of leading scientists to further explore the science behind this finding.

There was however, considerable concern amongst researchers and medics over the trend in children and young adults, especially women, to drink less milk, often in an attempt to lose weight. There is a strong link between the amount of milk drunk during childhood and the risk of bone fracture in women, milk being a valuable and ready source of calcium. It was explained that bone mass changes with age and as young people grow, they need calcium. Today milk consumption in females is apparently lowest between the ages of 11 and 18 years, whilst the need for calcium increases between the ages of 7 and 20 years. The less milk drunk, the more fractures occur later in life.

Sustainability and environment are also key components of this project. Although cows convert human-inedible food into highly nutritious food sources for humans, it was pointed out that all food production comes at an environmental cost. Sustainable production and consumption requires efficient use of resources, waste management and environmental protection. All that set against a background of climate change and the need to have socially acceptable systems of livestock production. On a positive note, recent consumer surveys describing UK consumer attitudes to dairy production and consumption, have shown that dairy farming is seen as good for the countryside and a good use of resources, and the great majority of consumers believe milk to be a natural product.

A key take-home message from this conference was that a sustainable diet was not just one that contributes to optimal nutrition and to a healthy diet, but also one that has a low environmental impact. It is evident that milk and milk products contribute positively to a healthy diet, but the environmental challenges that lay ahead will be considerable. The project is scheduled to end in the middle of 2015. The outcome will be of considerable significance to all sectors of the global dairy industry, and also to the human medical and health care sectors. Then, perhaps, those damaging myths can finally be kicked into the waste bin.

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