

A little wedge'll do ya

Cheese is getting a new image as a 'great food choice' . . . in healthy (small) portions

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In the past, cheese has gotten a bad rap, especially at times when low-fat diets have been predominant. Because it's high in fat - including saturated fat - and cholesterol, for a long time many doctors, nutritionists and dietitians cautioned their patients against eating much, if any, cheese.

But now, as often happens with perspectives on nutrition, the tide seems to be turning. New information that has come to light about the benefits of eating dairy has helped improve cheese's image - including news that the calcium and other nutrients in it can help the body burn fat as well as reduce the risk of diabetes and heart disease.

That seems to be good news for cheese lovers, a very large group here in the land of pizza, cheeseburgers, tuna melts and nachos. Let's face it, other than those who suffer from lactose intolerance or other dairy allergies, who wouldn't want to indulge in this tangy, gooey-when-melted, satisfying food? But make no mistake: The message is not that piling a layer of cheese on top of every meal will make you slimmer and healthier. Although some of the medical community is embracing cheese as a healthy food with potential slimming properties, there are still those who have their doubts and some serious caveats, mainly the importance of portion control.

No magic; calories count

"Cheese is a great food choice," said Dr. Michael Zemel, director of the University of Tennessee Nutrition Institute, where he conducted the ground-breaking and much talked about studies observing dairy and fat burning. "But it's not magic. It's not this giant eraser that takes away all the extra calories. Calories still count if you're trying to lose or maintain weight."

Zemel explained the dairy-dieting connection: "When your body doesn't have enough calcium, it mounts a hormonal response that tells the body: Let me hold onto whatever calcium I can. You release calcitriol, which turns on the molecular machinery for making fat from sugars, and inhibits the biochemical machinery involved in fat breakdown. It interferes



with a process called 'programmed cell death,' where we naturally get rid of the oldest, most fat-filled cells. So, on a low-calcium diet, you make more fat, break down less fat, and have bigger, fatter fat cells."

He said that when we consume plenty of calcium from dairy, calcitriol production is suppressed and weight loss is encouraged. "In clinical trials, we found that people who cut calories and were on a dairy-rich diet lost nearly twice as much weight as those who cut calories but were on a low-calcium diet," Zemel said, adding that the best results occurred when the calcium came from servings of dairy, rather than calcium supplements.

"They lost twice as much fat, and most of that fat came from the midsections of their bodies. That's great from both a cosmetic standpoint and a health standpoint, because that's where the most dangerous fat is, the fat associated with diabetes and heart disease."

Other sources of calcium

But cheese is certainly not the only source of calcium, and still in the minds of some it is not the best source - at least not for everybody. "The USDA recommends three servings of dairy a day, each of which could be eight ounces of milk, six to eight ounces of yogurt or one and a half ounces of hard cheese," said Lisa Young, an adjunct professor in nutrition and public health at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education and author of "The Portion Teller: Smartsizes Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss" (Morgan Road Books, 2005). "The more nutrient-dense sources of calcium are the milk and yogurt. If you're on a weight-loss diet, you want the most calcium for the least calories. An eight-ounce yogurt will give you about 300 to 400 milligrams of calcium. To get that much from cheese, you would have to eat hunks of it, and that's not going to help you lose weight.

"That's not to say you shouldn't have any cheese," Young continued, "but you don't want to be putting it on everything. A serving of cheese is about the size of two fingers. If you've eaten more cheese than you have fingers - which many people do - you're in trouble."

Cynthia Sass, a registered dietitian and national spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, uses a different portion guideline. "A healthy portion of shredded cheese is about the size of a golf ball," she said. "It's almost like having powdered milk, because you can only have so little of it. With yogurt or milk, on the other hand, you can have a whole cup. You need to think of cheese as more of a condiment than the basis of a meal."

Fat, cholesterol concerns

The fat and cholesterol contents also concern her. For example, according to the USDA, a one-ounce serving (approximately a one-inch cube) of Cheddar cheese has 9.4 grams of fat, 5.98 of them saturated, and 30 milligrams of cholesterol. (Source: www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/

[cgi-bin/list_nut_edit.pl](#)).

"There is a lot of saturated fat in cheese," Sass explained. "The USDA is recommending that no more than 10 percent of our calories - or about 20 grams per day - should come from saturated fat. I would caution people who have high cholesterol or a family history of heart disease [against] choosing cheese, unless it was low-fat or fat-free cheese."

Indeed, the USDA, the American Dietetic Association, the American Dairy Association and the National Dairy Council all recommend eating low-fat or fat-free versions of all dairy - milk, yogurt and cheese.

"We're especially recommending low-fat and fat-free varieties if you have problems with high cholesterol or heart disease," said Barbara Baron, RD, president of the New York State Dietetic Association and a spokesperson for the National Dairy Council. "But if you don't have those problems, regular cheese can be worked into your diet. It doesn't need to be a taboo food, especially if there's no portion distortion."

Joan Oxford, director of nutrition at Long Island Jewish Hospital, agreed. "You can have real cheese," she said. "Just use a little less. You don't have to use that much to get a nice taste."

Low-fat and nonfat . . . and the taste factor

While various government agencies

recommend switching to low-fat or nonfat cheeses,

some health care professionals disagree, saying taste and

other factors are very

important.

"I think fat-free cheese is a waste," says Margo Mittler, who is a registered dietitian and a nutritional consultant to Fairway Market. "It doesn't melt, and it has no taste. I recommend regular cheese but in moderation. If you're one of those people who puts cheese on everything, I'd say use low-fat cheese."

"When you remove some or all of the fat from any dairy product, you're removing taste, flavor and satisfaction," says Holly Shellowitz, a certified nutritional counselor from Long Beach. "Also, a lot of the nutrients in dairy products are in the fat. I recommend full-fat, high-quality cheeses in moderation to my clients, because it is so much more satisfying."

NYU nutrition expert Lisa Young concurs. "If you crave cheese, do yourself a favor and eat a real piece of cheese. Cut yourself a sliver of Brie, or whatever kind you like, eat it and enjoy it. Otherwise, if you substitute with low-fat or no-fat cheese, you're going to eat much more. And still crave the Brie."

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