

Dairy, Calcium, and Heart Health: What Wisconsinites Should Know

According to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), our state has nearly 1,200 licensed cheesemakers. We also produce more than 600 types, styles, and varieties of cheese—nearly double the number of any other state! As America's Dairyland, Wisconsin has built a rich tradition around milk, cheese, and other dairy products. But when it comes to heart health, dairy often sends mixed messages.

Full-fat dairy products such as whole milk, cream, and many aged cheeses can be high in saturated fat and sodium. Over time, excessive intake may raise cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease.

Still, not all dairy products are harmful. When eaten in moderation and as part of a balanced diet, dairy provides significant benefits. Dairy is a valuable source of calcium, vitamin D, and protein—nutrients that support bone strength, muscle health, and overall wellness. Calcium plays an essential role in regulating heart muscle contractions, blood clotting, and blood pressure. Adequate calcium intake has been linked to a lower risk of high blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease. Vitamin D, which is often added to milk, helps the body absorb calcium more effectively.

The American Heart Association recommends everyone ages two years old and up, choose milk products that are low fat. Compared with whole milk and 2% fat milk, skim and 1% milk offer slightly more nutrients while providing far less saturated fat, cholesterol, and calories.

Dairy lovers don't need to give up their favorite foods. Softer, fresher varieties like mozzarella and ricotta are naturally lower in sodium and fat compared with sharp, aged cheeses. Cottage cheese, especially low-sodium versions, is another heart-smart choice. Yogurt—particularly nonfat or low-fat plain yogurt—provides protein and probiotics, which support digestion as well as cardiovascular health.

Health experts emphasize moderation and balance. Incorporating lower-fat dairy into meals—such as yogurt with fruit, skim milk in coffee, or mozzarella on a salad—allows families to enjoy Wisconsin's dairy heritage while supporting heart health. And if full-fat products are preferred, enjoying them in smaller portions is key. By choosing low-fat and lower-sodium options, Wisconsinites can take pride in their state's signature products while also protecting their hearts.

Quick Tips for Dairy Lovers

- **Choose skim or 1% milk** over whole milk for fewer calories and less saturated fat.
- **Pick softer cheeses** like mozzarella, ricotta, or cottage cheese—they're naturally lower in sodium.
- **Try Greek yogurt** for a protein boost without extra fat.
- **Watch portions** if you enjoy full-fat cheese or ice cream—small servings go a long way.
- **Pair dairy with produce**—add berries to yogurt or fresh veggies with cottage cheese.
- **Check labels** for sodium and added sugars, especially in flavored yogurts and processed cheeses.

Caffeine and the Heart: What You Need to Know

Caffeine is one of the most widely consumed stimulants in the world. It is found in coffee, tea, energy drinks, sodas, and even chocolate. For many people, that daily cup of coffee is a part of everyday life. But how does caffeine affect the heart?

Experts say the answer depends on how much you consume and how your body responds. In moderate amounts, caffeine is generally considered safe for most healthy adults. The American Heart Association notes that up to 400 milligrams of caffeine per day—roughly the amount in four cups of brewed coffee—is not associated with long-term heart problems in healthy individuals.

Caffeine works by stimulating the central nervous system, which can temporarily increase heart rate and blood pressure. For people who are sensitive to caffeine, even small amounts may cause palpitations, jitteriness, or trouble sleeping. Those with certain heart conditions, such as arrhythmias or high blood pressure, may need to limit or avoid caffeine altogether.

Some research has suggested that regular coffee drinkers may actually have a lower risk of heart disease and stroke, likely due to antioxidants found in coffee beans. However, the benefits can be outweighed if caffeine intake is excessive or paired with added sugars and high-calorie creamers often found in flavored drinks.

Energy drinks are particularly concerning. Energy drinks often contain very high levels of caffeine along with other stimulants, which may place extra stress on the heart. These drinks should be avoided especially by children, teens, and individuals with existing heart conditions.

The bottom line: caffeine in moderation is generally safe and may even offer some benefits. But it's important to know your limits, pay attention to how your body reacts, and choose heart-smart options when reaching for your daily pick-me-up.

Quick Facts on Caffeine and Heart Health

- **Recommended limit:** Up to 400 mg per day for most healthy adults (about four 8-ounce cups of coffee).
- **Pregnant or breastfeeding women:** Limit to about 200 mg daily.
- **Teens and children:** Best to avoid or consume very sparingly.
- **High-risk groups:** People with high blood pressure, irregular heart rhythms, or sensitivity to stimulants should limit or avoid caffeine.
- **Watch out for energy drinks:** These may contain more caffeine than coffee, plus added stimulants, which can increase heart risks.
- **Beware of added sweeteners:** These may increase fat and sugar consumption.