



Cheese Myths Debunked

Even though dairy foods are excellent sources of essential nutrients, there are misperceptions about the role they play in a healthy diet. We debunk some of the myths surrounding cheese and provide evidence to help you educate your shoppers about this delicious and nutritious food.

Myth: Cheese and Dairy Make You Fat

While cheese is relatively high in fat, a study that followed 462 healthy Iranian adults found that those who consumed more milk, yogurt, and cheese were less likely to be overweight or obese compared to those who did not eat very much.¹ It is important to remember that cheese, like any food product, should be consumed in moderation. A weight loss study found that obese adults who ate three servings a day of milk, yogurt or cheese lost 70% more bodyweight and 64% more body fat than those who ate less than one serving per day.² Even children may benefit from eating dairy! After following a group of children from the age of two to eight, researchers discovered that those who ate more calcium-rich foods such as milk, cheese, and yogurt had a lower percentage body fat.³ You don't have to stick to non-fat dairy either. A study conducted in Sweden observed that even whole-fat dairy can be part of a healthy diet. Their results showed that normal-weight women who had more than 1 serving a day of higher fat dairy foods (whole milk, sour cream, cheese, etc.) were less likely to gain two pounds or more per year compared to women who habitually ate less dairy.⁴ The women who did not eat dairy often were actually at higher risk of gaining two pounds per year!

In any health or weight-gain study, the issue is always “what are the other people eating instead?” Dairy foods may help satisfy your appetite so that you cut back on other, less nutritious foods.

¹ *International Journal of Obesity*. 2005 Jan; 29(1):115-21 (Mirmiran P et al.)

² *Obesity Research*. 2004 Apr;12(4):582-590 (Zemel MB et al.)

³ *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2003 Dec;103(12):1626-31 (Skinner JD et al.)

⁴ *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. 2006 Dec;84:1481-88 (Rosell M et al.)





Myth: Cheese is Too Salty

While we know that habitually eating large amounts of sodium (salt) can lead to high blood pressure, sodium is actually an essential nutrient that the body needs every day in small amounts. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans currently recommends having no more than 2,300 mg/day (1,500 mg for those over 51 or otherwise at risk).

Traditional cheesemaking requires salt as an ingredient, to enhance the flavor and turn milk into a stable, long-lasting food. While many people think that cheese is a major source of salt, it contributes only 3.5% of the sodium the U.S. population eats on a daily basis.¹ There are certain cheeses that have more sodium than others. An ounce of “American cheese” – those common plastic-wrapped slices –has two and a half times the sodium of a traditional, natural cheddar and more than twenty times the sodium of Swiss cheese. Choose your cheeses wisely, and enjoy. (In fact, “American cheeses” aren’t technically cheese. They’re known as pasteurized processed food products because they are made from whey derivatives.) Everything in moderation can be included in a healthy diet and this goes for cheese as well. It is better to eat a few slices or cubes of good cheese every day rather than an entire block of cheese in a sitting. Cheese is an accompaniment, not a meal unto itself.

¹ *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010.*

Myth: Pasteurized Cheese is the Only Healthy Option

Not true! Raw milk cheese has been eaten safely for centuries, and can be another good option along with cheese made from pasteurized milk. Raw milk cheese has become a heated topic of debate in recent decades among policy makers and the public. Raw milk cheese is made from milk that has not undergone a heat treatment called pasteurization. The sale of raw milk cheese is perfectly legal in the U.S. In fact, many grocery stores carry a wide array of these cheeses. Many of the world’s most famous cheeses, such as Gruyere, Roquefort, and Parmigiano-Reggiano are made from raw milk. Current legislation dictates that all raw milk cheese sold must be aged for 60 days. While cheese made from unpasteurized milk may be a concern for some people, the food safety risk of raw milk cheese is exceedingly low. Between 1993 and 2006, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported 122 incidents of dairy-related illness, with only 27 of those cases involving raw milk cheese.¹ More importantly, 38 of the 122 cases were a result of cheese made from pasteurized milk. Immune-compromised individuals, such as pregnant and lactating women as well as the elderly, should ask their doctor before consuming cheese or other dairy products made with unpasteurized milk. Both raw milk cheese and pasteurized cheese, when properly produced, have extremely strong reputations for quality and safety.

¹ *Emerging Infectious Diseases.* 2012 Mar;18(3):385-91 (Langer AJ et al.)

Myth: I Have to Give up Cheese If I’m Lactose Intolerant

A major concern dietitians have for people who are lactose intolerant is whether they are getting adequate amounts of essential nutrients like calcium and vitamin D, which are readily found in dairy. All dairy-based cheese contains lactose, but some have less than others. While fresh unripened cheeses or processed cheese spreads may not be an option for most, naturally-aged cheese is generally well tolerated. As a cheese matures, the level of lactose considerably decreases. Aged cheese includes varieties like aged cheddar, Swiss, Parmesan, and Gouda. But, why are these cheeses in particular more forgiving? During the cheesemaking process, most of the lactose is drained off with the whey (liquid part). While





there is a small amount left in the curd, this turns into lactic acid during the aging process (also known as acidification). In the end, there are only traces of lactose left in the cheese when you buy it in the store. Overall, the older the cheese is, the less lactose it contains.

Another option for people who are lactose intolerant is cheese made from goat and sheep milk. For most people, these varieties are more digestible than cheese made from cow's milk. The fat molecules in goat's milk are significantly smaller than those in cow's milk, and are thus easier for the human digestive system to break down. This results in fewer symptoms for people with lactose intolerance. Everyone's tolerance for lactose is different. What is a perfectly tolerable amount for some, may not be for others. Listen to your body, and respond accordingly. The point is that individuals with lactose intolerance may not need to steer clear of cheese entirely.

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Myth: Fermentation is Just a Passing Fad

Fermentation seems to be taking center stage these days with books and blogs promoting the process. But far from a fad, fermentation is one of the oldest forms of food preservation.

Traditional cheesemaking, once referred to as “milk’s leap toward immortality,” was a way to preserve fluid milk. In the millennia before refrigeration, milk was prone to spoilage in just a few short hours. The presence of good bacteria, and generally also salt and a low pH, allowed the highly-nutritious but highly-perishable substance that is milk to be an important provision in many cultures months and even years after the cows, goats, or sheep were milked. Without the fermentation step, cheese would lose much of its delectable flavor and texture.

Fermentation is a chemical process initiated by microscopic bacteria. In essence, microorganisms break down complex compounds into smaller molecules. Bacteria and yeast consume the natural sugars found in food and depending on the context, convert them into acid, alcohol, or carbon dioxide. Fermentation is a key step in the process of making many foods such as wine, beer, bread, sausage – and of course, cheese!



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