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The Cheese and Yogurt Diet: Assessing The Dairy Industry's Weight-Loss Claims

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(By Tara Parker-Pope)

NEW ADS FOR DAIRY products go far beyond the milk mustache, now promising viewers that eating more dairy foods can help shrink your waistline.

One ad shows a woman eating yogurt to fit into a bikini. Another shows a glass of milk shrinking to an hourglass shape, ending with the tagline "Milk your diet."

But while consuming more milk and yogurt may sound appealing to dieters, losing weight by eating more dairy isn't as simple or clear cut as the ads suggest.

Numerous scientific studies -- in both rats and people -- show a link between dairy consumption and weight loss. But to lose weight, dairy dieters still have to dramatically scale back calories. In addition, little independent research has been done on the topic -- most of the dairy-diet studies have been funded by the dairy industry. And researchers disagree on just how big of an effect dairy foods really can have on weight management.

The dairy diet got a boost in April, when the medical journal *Obesity Research* published a University of Tennessee study of 32 obese adults, all of whom cut 500 calories from their daily diet for six months. But while the dieters all counted calories, one group consumed three daily servings of dairy foods. Another group consumed one or fewer servings, and a third added extra calcium via supplements. The study, funded by the National Dairy Council, showed the dieters who ate more dairy lost an average of 11% of their body weight, compared with 8.6% in the supplement group and 2.5% in the low-dairy group.

Unexpectedly, the high-dairy dieters lost far more of their weight around their abdomen -- losing about an inch more around their waists than the low-dairy dieters. But while the study is provocative, it was small, and by no means conclusive. The dairy dieters lost about a pound a week -- the amount that would be expected on a 500-calorie-a-day deficit.

Exactly how calcium and dairy might help with weight management isn't clear. Dairy products, in general, may simply be more satisfying than other foods, making high-dairy dieters less hungry and more likely to stick to their diet. But the claims of the dairy industry go far beyond diets like Atkins, which advocate dairy foods because of their low-carb count.

Dairy foods also contain amino acids that protect muscle mass, one reason a dairy dieter might lose more fat. Adding calcium also suppresses certain hormones, shutting down signals to fat cells and allowing fat to break down more quickly. Increasing calcium may reduce levels of an enzyme that causes fat to accumulate around the abdomen -- thus accounting for the smaller waistlines of dairy dieters.

As for the ads from the Milk Processor Education Program and Yoplait yogurt, "It's too early to make these huge claims," says Jennifer Keller, nutrition-projects coordinator for the Physician's

Committee for Responsible Medicine, a health-advocacy group that has been a longtime critic of dairy consumption.

Among the group's concerns: Some studies have suggested a link between high dairy consumption and prostate cancer, possibly because higher intake of calcium lowers the body's production of vitamin D3, which may offer cancer protection. Most experts, though, say more research is needed.

Many nutrition researchers remain cautious about whether science supports the ad campaigns. In animal studies, rats and mice fed high-calcium diets have been shown to lose more weight. But, says Jack A. Yanovski, head of the National Institutes of Health's unit on growth and obesity, "when it comes to humans, the data are far less clear."

Even so, national surveys of eating habits have consistently shown that Americans with the lowest calcium intake tend to weigh more. And an NIH review last year of major studies on calcium and weight loss -- co-authored by Dr. Yanovski -- noted that evidence so far supports the idea that calcium aids weight management, but bigger studies still need to be done.

Nobody thinks dairy products change the basic rules of weight loss: To lose a pound, dieters still need to take in 3,500 less calories than they expend, whether or not they are eating large amounts of dairy. Most nutritionists recommend low-fat dairy foods, as whole-milk foods are high in saturated fat.

"Dairy is not a magic bullet and calcium is not a magic bullet," says Creighton University Professor Robert Heaney, an Omaha endocrinologist who has received research funds from the dairy industry.

Many researchers think dairy might be most useful to help prevent people from getting fat. The difference between a high- and low-calcium diet averages out to about 3/4 of a pound a year -- about the same the typical U.S. adult gains annually.

In a nine-month study at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, about 75 overweight patients are being put on a calorie-controlled diet for three months. Then, they will be put on either high- or low-dairy weight-management diets. The study is funded by the dairy industry, but the researchers are also hoping to win additional NIH support. Results won't be available for several months.

"There's a growing body of evidence that seems favorable," says Joseph E. Donnelly, director of the center for physical activity and weight management. "But I don't know that it is yet a slam dunk."