

Invest in your family's health by budgeting for nutrient-rich foods

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Times are tough for many families and schools – so those food dollars need to work hard by providing plenty of nutrition. Many nutrient-rich foods such as milk, are a good economic and nutritional value because they pack in many essential nutrients at a low cost per serving.

A new report released today from Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK), a national non-profit group that addresses childhood obesity, stresses the importance of improving nutritional quality of school programs by encouraging foods that provide important nutrients for children, rather than focusing on foods and beverages to avoid. The report states that, children consume too many calories and not enough nutrients. Only two percent of youth consume the recommended number of servings from all food groups.

Making progress to improve these alarming statistics may seem more difficult than ever. With rising food prices, parents can find meal-planning a challenge. Many schools across the country are also struggling with tight budgets to put nutritious kid-appealing meals in the cafeteria as kids head back to school this fall. So, considering the nutrient-richness of a food can be a key to deciding whether to add it to the shopping cart or the lunch line.

Nutrition researchers at the National Dairy Council (NDC) support the AFHK's position that schools follow the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which includes recommendations for nutrient-rich foods like low-fat and fat-free dairy products. Penny for penny, dairy is one of the

best nutritional values of any food group. The Dietary Guidelines identify the milk group as a "food group to encourage" because milk products provide key nutrients including calcium, potassium, phosphorous, protein, vitamins A, D and B12, riboflavin and niacin especially important for growing children and teens. That's a powerful nutritional package delivered in a cost-efficient way.

Milk also provides three of the five nutrients that the Dietary Guidelines say are lacking in most children's diets – calcium, magnesium and potassium. Since the overwhelming majority of children do not consume the Dietary Guidelines' recommended three servings of low-fat or fat-free milk per day, increasing children's consumption of milk to recommended levels can be a key to improving diet quality.

"The effects of today's rough economy can certainly be felt on most everyone's pocketbook," noted Mary Martin Nordness, M.A., R.D., L.D., CHES, an NDC spokesperson. "When trimming grocery lists or school meal plans to save money, it's important to remember the nutritional and economic value that nutrient-rich foods like milk provide for our children. Milk, cheese and yogurt are especially critical for growing children as they contain a unique combination of nine essential nutrients critical for bone health and development."

NDC is committed to improving children's health by working with the dairy industry to develop milk and milk products that best meet kids' needs for both nutrition and taste. The dairy industry has increased milk's appeal to children by making specific and straightforward improvements, including plastic packaging, one or more additional flavors, and better refrigeration and merchandising, resulting in a 37 percent increase in school milk consumption in a pilot test.

According to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines, small amounts of sugars added to nutrient-rich foods, such as low-fat and fat-free dairy foods,

may increase consumption of such foods by enhancing the taste, so overall nutrient intake is improved without contributing excessive calories. In fact, a recent study published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association found that children who drink flavored or plain milk consume more nutrients and have a lower or comparable body mass index (BMI) than children who don't drink milk.

To best understand how low the calorie count can be for flavored milk while still pleasing children's tastes, the dairy industry conducts ongoing research. From this research, many milk processors have been proactively working on great tasting, lower-calorie flavored milk formulations for the '08-09 school year.

For more information on the health benefits of dairy foods, visit www.NationalDairyCouncil.org and visit www.3aday.org to find delicious recipes, health tips and tools.

Source: National Dairy Council

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