

The dairy dilemma: Low-fat is not necessarily better for kids

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Children who consume full-fat dairy products do not show an increased risk of obesity or heart disease, according to an Edith Cowan University (ECU) research finding that raises questions about the current dietary advice for children.

Published today in *Advances in Nutrition*, the ECU research reviewed 29 studies from around the world that examined consumption of full-fat [dairy](#) products in [children](#).

The researchers found there was no clear link between the consumption of whole-fat dairy products and weight gain, high cholesterol or high blood pressure in children. However, most studies were observational, with a lack of good quality trials noted.

The systematic review of research was a collaboration between ECU, the University of Washington and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Centre in the United States.

Not the enemy first thought

The study's lead author, Associate Professor Therese O'Sullivan from ECU's School of Medical and Health Sciences, said the findings highlighted the need for better evidence in this area.

"Dietary guidelines in Australia and other countries recommend children primarily consume reduced-fat dairy products to maintain a healthy weight and good cardiovascular health," she said.

"We found studies were consistent in reporting that whole-fat dairy products were not associated with increased levels of [weight gain](#) or obesity.

"Reduced-fat dairy is generally recommended for both adults and children over the age of two years due to its lower energy and saturated fat content.

"However, studies suggest children who consumed low-fat over full-fat dairy were actually replacing those calories from fat with other foods.

"This suggests that low-fat dairy is not as filling as whole-fat dairy, which may lead kids to consume more of other foods. Health effects may depend on what these replacement foods are."

Conflicting advice

With childhood obesity an important issue, the need for evidence-based guidelines for parents has never been greater, according to Associate Professor O'Sullivan.

"Parents are already overwhelmed by conflicting advice for kids' nutrition, especially when it comes to full-fat versus low-fat dairy," she said.

"We need more good quality research to inform evidence-based guidelines for parents, even if that means rethinking what we thought we knew about dairy."

Fats are not all equal

Associate Professor O'Sullivan also said whole-fat dairy may play an important role in a balanced diet for growing children.

"Dairy is a good dietary source of nutrients for healthy development, including protein, calcium, potassium, phosphorus and several vitamins," she said.

"Even though the fats found in whole-fat dairy are mostly saturated fats, they don't appear to be associated with the same detrimental [health effects](#) observed with foods like fatty meats."

Towards the future

Associate Professor O'Sullivan is also leading ECU's Milky Way Study in collaboration with the University of Western Australia and the Telethon Kids Institute. The randomised controlled trial is investigating the effects of dairy fat intake in children, and results are expected in mid-2020.

More information: 'Whole-fat or reduced-fat dairy product intake, adiposity, and cardiometabolic health in children: a systematic review' was published in *Advances in Nutrition*.

Provided by Edith Cowan University

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