

On nutrition: Promising news about cheese

October 13 2023, by Barbara Intermill, Tribune News Service



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More than 180 years ago, Wisconsin farmers began making cheese to preserve excess milk from their cows (wisconsincheese.com). Today, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Wisconsin is the top cheese-producing state, followed by California, Idaho and New Mexico.

New Mexico? I'm a native of this state, so I do know that cheese is a staple in many New Mexican dishes. Queso blanco, for example, is a soft crumbly white cheese often melted into sauces to top enchiladas or crumbled over beans, tacos or huevos rancheros ("wey-vose ran-chair-ohs")—a popular breakfast dish.

Other cheeses inspired by Spanish-speaking cultures include Queso Para Freir (translated "cheese that is fried")—a favorite in the Caribbean and Central America. This mild-tasting cheese is also used in sandwiches and baked dishes, according to Goya Foods, the largest, Hispanic-owned [food](#) company in the United States.

How does this culturally diverse food fit into a healthful diet? Cheese is in the dairy group—one of six core elements that make up a healthful dietary pattern, according to the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. And while this report generally recommends lower fat versions, some intriguing research suggests that traditional cheeses may also be reasonable choices.

Natural cheese is a fermented food made with milk, salt, probiotics (aka "good bacteria") and rennet, an enzyme that causes milk protein to form curds. A 2022 review in the journal [Microorganisms](#) includes cheese as a traditional fermented food.

Studies from around the world, say these authors, have revealed strong associations between fermented foods and reduced risk of heart disease, diabetes as well as a lower risk of death.

Cheese is also a significant source of saturated fat which we are called to limit in our diets. Evidence is emerging, however, that we may need to judge the saturated fat in foods by the company they keep.

For example, a 2022 [research article](#) in *The American Journal of Clinical*

Nutrition reported that a higher intake of [saturated fat](#) from dairy foods had less of an impact on heart disease than a lower intake of these foods, especially in males. And while not statistically significant, the same intake of saturated fats from non-dairy foods did not have the same favorable outcomes.

How can this be? We don't know for sure, but some research suggests the mix of calcium and other nutrients in [cheese](#) may reduce how much fat we absorb from these foods, says the National Dairy Council (NDC), a non-profit dairy nutrition research and education organization.

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Citation: On nutrition: Promising news about cheese (2023, October 13) retrieved 27 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-10-nutrition-news-cheese.html>

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