

Is Chocolate Milk Healthy for Kids?

Serving chocolate milk in school cafeterias is once again under attack, but is it really that bad for kids? Nutrition expert Joy Bauer weighs in.

By Sharon Tanenbaum

Chocolate milk: To drink or not to drink? That's the hot-button issue on the minds of school officials, parents, and nutrition experts across the country.

The debate over whether chocolate milk should be served in school cafeterias — and whether it's healthy — reared its head again when the Los Angeles Unified School District announced it would ban chocolate- and strawberry-flavored milk from its schools starting this summer. Superintendent John Deasy pushed for the ban with influence from celebrity chef and food activist Jamie Oliver, who has said that flavored milk has as much sugar as a candy bar.

In April, *The Washington Post* reported that Fairfax County, Va., schools would reintroduce chocolate milk after they banned it (along with D.C. schools) last year. The new, reformulated chocolate milk is low-fat and contains less sugar than previous versions (and the sugar is from sugar cane or beets instead of the more processed high-fructose corn syrup).

But the chocolate milk controversy is bigger than just school policy. Chocolate milk is higher in sugar and calories than non-flavored milk, but some kids simply refuse to drink plain milk. (According to dairy industry data, milk consumption in 58 schools dropped by an average of 35 percent when flavored milk was removed or limited.)

So are kids better off consuming the extra sugar and calories in chocolate milk than not consuming any milk — a vital source of calcium, vitamin D, and other vital nutrients — at all?

Chocolate Milk vs. Regular Milk

All milk — flavored or not — is packed with nutrients. One cup of fortified low-fat milk contains around 100 calories and 13 grams of sugar (in the form of lactose, a sugar found naturally in milk) and about 300 milligrams of calcium (about 25 percent of kids' daily need) as well as vitamin D, vitamin A, B vitamins, and minerals like potassium and phosphorus. The same size serving of typical low-fat chocolate milk contains about 160 calories and 25 grams of sugar (the increased amount comes from added sugar), with comparable levels of vitamins and minerals.

It may not seem like a huge difference, but over time that extra sugar and calories add up, especially when they're consumed daily at school and as part of an already too-sugary diet, explains Joy Bauer, RD, nutrition and health expert for the *Today* show and *Everyday Health*. A recent Emory University study found that added sugar accounts for 20 percent of teens' daily calories; those with the highest sugar intake had lower levels of "good" HDL cholesterol and higher levels of "bad" LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, and a higher risk of heart disease and diabetes later in life. Much of the teens' sugar intake came from sweetened beverages, the study authors said.

Should Kids Drink Chocolate Milk at All?

"I don't recommend that kids drink chocolate milk in schools," says Bauer, because the added sugar provides unnecessary extra calories when so many kids are already struggling with their weight and unhealthy eating.

Instead, Bauer says it's definitely best to encourage your kids to drink plain 1 percent or fat-free milk with their lunch at school. (Kids shouldn't drink whole milk after age 2, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.) If your child will only drink flavored milk, Bauer says it's better to have them drink water with their school lunch and serve them chocolate milk with breakfast, a snack, or dinner at home (stick with one serving a day for flavored milk), where you can make your own healthier version.

"At home parents can control the kind of milk poured and the amount of chocolate syrup or sweetened cocoa stirred in," she says. Just mix two teaspoons of chocolate syrup or sweetened cocoa powder into fat-free milk, which only adds around 7 extra grams of sugar and 35 calories.

One thing most experts can agree on: Kids need to get enough calcium (800 milligrams a day for ages 4 to 8; 1,300 milligrams a day for ages 9 to 18; 800) and milk is often an important calcium contributor in most kids' diets. To reach those amounts, children need multiple servings of calcium-rich foods a day, including milk as well as low-fat yogurt, cheese, and leafy green vegetables like spinach and broccoli. If you're concerned about your child's calcium intake, ask your pediatrician about taking supplements.

Bottom line: Pre-mixed chocolate milk contains added sugar and calories that kids don't need, and it shouldn't be served in schools, says Bauer. If your child will only drink chocolate moo juice, serve it occasionally at home where you can whip up your own healthier version.