



« Beyond nutrients: a new approach to understanding the health effects of food »

It is increasingly recognised that the effects of milk and dairy foods on health extend beyond the individual nutrients they naturally contain. Rather, the unique combination of nutrients and bioactive factors, and how they interact with each other in the dairy matrix, combine to produce the overall effect on health.

The food matrix

The 'food matrix' describes a food in terms of both its structure and its nutrient content, and how these interact together. Foods consist of a large number of different nutrients that are contained in a complex physical structure.

The nature of the physical structure together with the mix of nutrients and bioactives can impact nutrient digestion, absorption and metabolism, affecting the overall nutritional and health properties of the food.

Whole foods or single nutrients

Nutrition research has traditionally focused on identifying the specific mechanisms and health impact of single nutrients – for example, saturated fatty acids in relation to blood lipids and cardiovascular disease (CVD). It has often then followed that nutrition policy is based on such associations - for example, recommendations to limit foods containing saturated fatty acids in order to reduce CVD risk.

More recently, however, nutrition research has shifted focus to examine the relationship of whole foods with health, including dairy foods. This is based on the premise that we do not eat nutrients in isolation but as foods, and in meals, and part of dietary patterns. From this research, a different picture has emerged than might be predicted from the nutrient content of the foods alone.

Cheese is a good example: despite its saturated fat (and salt) content, the majority of epidemiological studies report that cheese consumption does not increase the risk of CVD and may, in fact, be beneficial. Researchers have characterised this as a 'food matrix' effect. This recognises that the health effects of a food are much more complex than that of a single nutrient it contains or even a few nutrients. Rather, they are a function of both a food's structure and its nutrient composition, and how these interact with each other.

Complex dairy matrices

Milk and dairy products are complex foods naturally containing numerous nutrients and bioactive components. The rich matrix of nutrients includes high-quality protein, fat, lactose, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, iodine, vitamin B12, riboflavin (vitamin B2) and many other vitamins and minerals. Dairy is also rich in bioactive components, and fermented dairy foods contain bacteria that produce beneficial short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), vitamin K2 along with bioactive peptides.

In addition to their nutritional matrices, dairy foods also have complex physical matrices: from the solid matrix of cheese, gel-like structure of yogurt to liquid milk. The structure of a food matrix can have an impact on factors such as nutrient absorption and digestion and, therefore, the metabolic response after eating.

More than the sum of its nutrients

Given the complex nature of dairy matrices, it is perhaps not surprising that there is increasing evidence that the health effects of dairy foods extend beyond their constituent parts. Evidence to date suggests that milk and dairy matrices have specific beneficial effects on cardiometabolic disease risk, body weight and bone health.

For example, the effects of milk and dairy foods on bone health may be due in part to positive interactions of calcium, protein and phosphorus with each other and with lactose and bioactive peptides in the dairy matrices, rather than simply a 'calcium effect' as is often assumed. Similarly, the blood pressure lowering effect of milk may be the result of interactions between calcium, potassium, phosphorus and bioactive dairy peptides in the milk matrix.

In relation to cheese, the explanation for the potential beneficial rather than harmful effects on CVD may again lie in interactions of the components of the cheese matrix including calcium, phosphorus, the milk fat globule membrane and starter cultures, which modify saturated fatty acid-induced increases in blood lipids.

The matrix concept underlines the importance of considering the health effects of milk and dairy as whole foods, alongside the individual components they contain. This is particularly important in relation to public health policy, and there is a growing recognition that dietary guidance should be based on evaluation of the health impact of whole foods, including dairy, rather than on single nutrients.

About EMF

'Milk, Nutritious by Nature' is an information initiative from the European Milk Forum (EMF) addressing science-based issues on dairy and health and engaging in a dialogue with health and nutrition professionals. The Dairy Council for Northern Ireland is a member of EMF.

More information

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References

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