

Chocolate milk gets nutritionists' gold star

Many say benefits of milk outweigh risks of added sugar

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It was the last school day before Thanksgiving, and Traughber Junior High's lunchroom crackled with adolescent [energy](#) and anticipation of a holiday break starting in just a few hours.

Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at the Oswego school were busy polishing off selections from a multiple-choice menu that included tacos, salads and [chicken](#) patties, and even a serving of turkey.

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But when asked what the beverage of choice was, the students had a [clear](#) favorite.

"Chocolate milk," said several Traughber students scattered at different tables.

An estimated 75 percent of Traughber milk drinkers favor chocolate over plain, a percentage

in line with a 2010 national survey that reported that flavored varieties made up 70 percent of milk consumed in schools.

Kids like the taste, and fat-free chocolate and other flavored milks have the same critical vitamins and minerals as white milk, experts say.

"Because we do offer the flavored milk, it gives those students who wouldn't normally drink milk an option," said Linda Porth, who manages Oswego Community Unit School District 308 food service for Aramark, a nationwide school food service provider.

"Should those flavored milks not be present, those children may not choose milk at all to drink and then they would (miss) the calcium and Vitamin D," she said.

In northwest suburban Township High School District 211, the state's largest high school district with about 12,500 students, more than 27,000 cartons of [milk](#) are consumed in a typical school week.

"Milk and calcium are a focus for us at both breakfast and lunch," said Lauren Hummel, District 211 director of food service. "Both flavored and unflavored milk offer students a good source of calcium and other essential nutrients that teenagers are often lacking in their [diets](#)."

"Without serving [flavored](#) milk, student consumption would decrease drastically," she

said.

Milk served in schools — whether low-fat or no-fat, plain or flavored — contains the same nutrients, including calcium, potassium and vitamins A, D and B-12. Flavored milk, however, has a higher sugar level and up to 60 [calories](#) more per serving than plain milk.

The Elk Grove Village-based American Academy of Pediatrics says adequate calcium consumption during childhood and adolescence is critical in developing strong bones.

Not surprisingly, dairy industry groups advocate consumption of milk and other dairy products, especially as part of school meals. But state and other nationwide health and nutrition groups also enthusiastically back the benefits of low-fat, no-fat and flavored milks.



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And two physicians writing in the American Academy of Pediatrics' AAP News said that added sugar and sweeteners used in flavored milk are not a big deal.

"Unflavored milk is lower in sugar than flavored milk," Drs. Jatinder J.S. Bhatia and Frank R. Greer wrote in April 2007. "However, given the importance of calcium, vitamin D and other key ingredients in the diet of children and adolescents, flavored milks could be a nice alternative since the contribution of added sugars to the overall diet of young children is minimal."

For parents, chocolate milk definitely rules.

A recent online survey of 1,247 parents of school-age children found that 84 percent feel chocolate milk is an acceptable beverage to serve in cafeterias.

The survey, conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council, also found that 75 percent felt that milk's health benefits outweighed concerns about added sugar.

Moreover, 71 percent felt that [chocolate milk](#) was not a contributing factor to childhood obesity.

"While there is additional sugar in flavored milk, the amount that is added is said to only (make up) about 3 percent of the added sugars in children's diets," Hummel said, "whereas sodas and fruit drinks make up 45 percent of added sugars in their [diet](#)."

But not every district fully embraces chocolate milk.

Concerns about childhood obesity led Barrington Community Unit School District 220 to drop flavored milk at elementary schools in 2008.

A year later, it was back — one day a week — after [students](#) persuaded district officials to change their minds.

"The real impetus for returning it one day a week came from the students themselves," said district spokesman Jeffrey Arnett. "We had a group of students at one elementary school in particular who petitioned the superintendent and the [administration](#) to reconsider."

So each Friday, students at the district's eight elementary schools have their choice of [flavored](#) milks.

"We call it our Flavored Milk Fridays," Arnett said.