

Milk Does a Body What?



Smoke and mirrors on the way to the milk bar

by Michael Braunstein

Which of the following is a true statement?

- (a) Smoking tobacco eases asthma.
- (b) Coca leaves, from which cocaine is manufactured, is good for altitude sickness.
- (c) Three glasses of milk a day will help you lose weight.

Before answering, note that the claim for (c) is based on research at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, publicized in April 2004. The research became part of a massive ad campaign by American milk processors that suggested drinking more than five quarts of milk a week would help one lose weight. The campaign plainly was recommending drinking milk as a way to shed pounds.

While most readers might be surprised, it is true that doctors in the 1800s prescribed tobacco as relief for asthma. Nicotine is a powerful vasodilator, shrinking blood vessels, and temporarily opens bronchial tubes and eases breathing in the short term.

Cocaine for altitude sickness? Ask anyone who has visited Peru. *Maté de coca*, tea from the leaves of the coca plant (the source of the cocaine alkaloids) is a natural remedy for tourists in the towering Andes. Locals use it as an energy drink like we drink coffee or a Red Bull.

However, the controversy with (c), the claim that milk helps a person lose weight, appears to be brewing.

So both (a) and (b) are true, but (c) is becoming more questionable by the day.

Milk it for what it's worth

Milk and dairy products are some of the most highly promoted American commodities. Billboards, newspaper ads, TV time and Indy 500 winners splash the product before the consumer. The government subsidizes American dairy farmers and controls pricing to the tune of billions of dollars yearly. The European Union does the same. How is it that a supposedly valuable foodstuff requires so much promotion?

The dairy industry has succeeded in creating the image of a healthful, wholesome food. Critics say milk is anything but that. Now it seems the claim that milk can help a person lose weight has stoked the fires of criticism again. This time, the critics again come armed with their own research.

But the dairy industry's 2004 publicity campaign centered around the grand announcement that a small research project somehow came up with numbers at the end of the day that suggested drinking 24 ounces of milk daily — within a low-calorie diet — to lose weight. How big was the test group? All of 32 women. Who paid for the research? The National Dairy Council. When the research came out, eyebrows raised. Even moderates admitted that the research conclusions would have been more effective had the study not been funded by the dairy industry.

Now, more than a year later, new research published this month is finding the exact opposite.

In a Harvard Medical School study of more than 13,000 adolescents, researchers concluded that the National Dairy Council's advice of drinking milk to lose weight is ill-founded. According to press reports, lead researcher Catherine Berkey noted that "... children should not be drinking milk as a

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However the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine recommends exercise, sunshine and a dairy-free diet to be best.

means of losing weight or trying to control weight."

The new research put the Dairy Council on the defensive. The idea of drinking nearly a quart of milk a day to lose weight was confounding some critics, and now large amounts of evidence show it might not hold water.

Black is white and white is black

One wonders why the milk industry has to try so hard to sell its product, especially under the guise of being healthful. Another powerful ploy is the portrayal of dairy foods as a solid source for nutritional calcium. The milk industry has long played on the calcium/strong-bones parlay to raise the stakes in milk sales. However any claims of milk doing a body good when it comes to osteoporosis seem to be refuted by research *not* paid for by the milk industry.

We have been told in ads that milk helps build strong bones. The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine believes otherwise. On one of the group's websites, strongbones.org, the PCRM states that exercise, sunshine and a dairy-free diet are the best ways to build strong bones. Of course, this ranks the dairy industry and the doctors whose research is financially supported by it. Unfortunately, when it comes to strong bones, milk doesn't have a leg to stand on.

The PCRM cites one of the largest research studies ever, the Harvard Nurses' Health Study, which followed 75,000 women for 12 years. The study found no protective effect of increased milk consumption on fracture risk. In fact, studies showed that increased dairy consumption actually is associated with increased fracture risk! Though calcium is important to bone health, calcium in plants like broccoli and green vegetables is more readily absorbed by the body.

Other research finds that the high intake of animal protein provided in milk actually leaches calcium from the bones, making them weaker!

D truth

Another milk myth is the association with Vitamin D. We have been told that milk is a good source of Vitamin D, also linked to strong bones. In fact, milk doesn't contain Vitamin D. It may be *added* to milk, and typical amounts would be 100 International Units per glass. Our best source of Vitamin D is the natural synthesis of it by our bodies when we absorb sunlight.

Research conclusions announced this past week suggest that exposure to sunshine *without sunscreen* is healthier for us than using sunscreen. Vitamin D is that important.

Just 15 minutes in the sun could produce 100,000 IU of D. It would take 1,000 glasses of milk to get that much.

Maybe it's time to see milk and dairy products in a new light — a source of special and wonderful delights enjoyed with temperance as ice cream, cheese and sauces but not as a major part of the diet. Now if we can just get past those smiling geeks with the milk stashes.

Be well. 

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