

TODDLER & CHILD NUTRITION

What's the fuss about Milk?

Yvonne Gavan finds out how much milk toddlers should have, and what to do if your child just isn't interested.

My three-year-old daughter doesn't like milk. Whether it's on cereal, disguised as a pink milkshake or in one of those little cartons with a straw, she just won't touch it. Should I be concerned? Well, according to the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, my problem isn't an unusual one. Despite its reputation as a staple of the Irish diet, milk consumption has dropped considerably in the past ten years. But why do we need to make sure our toddlers are getting enough?

"From 0-6 months all of a baby's nutritional needs are met either through drinking breast milk or infant formula, and cows' milk isn't recommended before a child reaches 12 months," explains Dr Catherine Logan, nutritionist with the National Dairy Council.

"From that point on it's good to try and include whole milk in your toddler's diet. It makes an ideal drink due to the fact that it contains a unique package of essential nutrients, including carbohydrates, protein, calcium, vitamin B12 and riboflavin – all pivotal to the growth, maintenance and function of little bodies."

But it's most important function is to supply the body with calcium. Along with the decline in milk consumption, Ireland has also seen a decline in general calcium consumption – with a third of children in the country currently failing to meet their daily requirements.

When you consider that a baby's skeleton contains about 25g of calcium at birth,



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compared to roughly 1,200g in an adult, and the only way that our bodies can take that on board is through food, you can see just how crucial it is.

"Children who don't meet their calcium requirements would, in the worst case scenario, develop misshaped bones or rickets," warns paediatric dietitian Judy Moore.

But if your toddler really doesn't like milk there are plenty of other calcium-rich foods they can enjoy instead.

"Milk forms part of a food group which includes cheese and yoghurt," adds Moore. "The daily guidelines from the Department of Health & Children recommend that toddlers consume three ¾ oz servings of dairy products a day – a serving is ¾ oz of milk, a pot of yoghurt or the amount of cheese that you'd put in a sandwich or on top of a pizza."

"Goats' milk and goats' milk products are completely interchangeable with cows' milk in terms of nutrients," she

adds, "and may be tolerated by your child if they're finding it difficult to digest cows' milk products. But if you suspect they have an allergy you should take them to see a dietitian who can test them for lactose intolerance and cows' milk protein intolerance."

Another important factor is to make sure that all children up to the age of two eat full fat dairy products. "This is because toddlers of that age need the extra fat provided by the milk," says Moore. "It's fine to start giving your child semi-skimmed milk from age two, but fully skimmed milk isn't suitable as a main drink until at least five years as it doesn't contain enough calories to meet their needs."

What about calcium from other food sources? Tinned mashed sardines, tofu, fortified white bread and chick peas all contain calcium but, according to Moore, most alternative food sources aren't as readily absorbed by the body.

"Dairy is the only food group that provides toddlers with an adequate source of calcium," she explains. "The set up of molecules present in dairy makes it incredibly bio available – and much easier for our systems to absorb than calcium carbonate, the chalk-based form of calcium that's added to soy and rice milk."

The most important thing to avoid when it comes to milk, is giving toddlers bottles of milk throughout the day, warns Moore. "If they form a bottle habit they won't have the appetite to eat proper meals and can become deficient in iron – which is more common these days and can cause more frequent infections, lethargy, and development delays."

So if you can get your toddler to drink milk – from a cup – you're lucky. The rest of us will have to continue coming up with new and exciting cheese and cream-filled recipes! Macaroni cheese followed by rice pudding anyone?