Whole and Reduced-Fat Milk are Back on the Menu

The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025, signed into law in January 2026, expands the types of milk schools may offer as part of the National School Lunch Program. Schools may now offer a broader range of fluid milk options, including whole and reduced-fat milk, while continuing to meet federal nutrition standards.[1] These updates provide schools with greater flexibility to support nutrient intake, student choice and diverse preferences, while maintaining compliance with USDA meal pattern guidelines.

The 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (the Guidelines) recommend 3 daily servings of dairy as a core component of a healthy dietary pattern. Dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt provide a health-promoting bundle of nutrients including high-quality protein, essential vitamins and minerals, and healthy fats. The Guidelines include nutrient-dense dairy foods across a range of fat levels as options to choose from within balanced eating patterns.[2]

NDC
NATIONAL DAIRY COUNCIL™

YOUR MILK COMES FROM A GOOD PLACE
AMERICAN DAIRY ASSOCIATION NORTH EAST

WHAT CHANGED AND WHY IT MATTERS

Schools participating in the National School Lunch Program may offer students a wider range of milk options at lunch, including:

- Whole (3.25%) milk
- Reduced-fat (2%) milk
- Low-fat (1%) milk
- Fat-free milk
- Lactose-free dairy milk
- Nondairy beverages that are nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk

Schools are required to offer **at least two different milk options daily,** with flexibility to include flavored or unflavored and organic or nonorganic milk options.

Saturated fat from fluid milk is excluded from the weekly saturated fat limit for school meals.[1] This provides schools flexibility to offer whole and reduced-fat milk while remaining within federal nutrition standards. Of note, the other nutrition and calorie limits remain unchanged, and there's a difference of roughly 45 calories between whole and 1% milk.

Why this matters:

- Students may be more likely to choose and drink milk they prefer
- Greater choice may help increase overall nutrient intake
- Schools can better accommodate diverse student preferences and nutritional needs

MILK MATTERS FOR GROWING KIDS

5 Facts About Dairy Milk and How It Helps Children Meet Their Nutrition Needs

1 Milk Delivers a Powerful Package of 13 Essential Nutrients

All dairy milk, whether whole, 2%, low-fat or fat-free, provides 13 essential nutrients, including high-quality protein, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, iodine, zinc, selenium and vitamins A, D, B12, riboflavin, niacin and pantothenic acid. Together, these nutrients help support children's growth, development and learning.[3-4]

2 Milk Provides High-Quality Protein to Fuel Strong Bodies and Active Days

Each cup of dairy milk provides 8 grams of high-quality protein, which can help support muscle development, bone health, satiety and sustained energy. Milk also contributes fluids and electrolytes, helping support hydration for active children throughout the school day.

3 The Dairy Matrix Helps Explain the Uniqueness of Dairy Foods Across Fat Levels

Whole milk is often characterized by its saturated fat content (i.e., 5 g per serving). However, saturated fat in dairy foods is complex and includes a diverse array of over 400 unique fatty acids — including short-, medium-, branched- and odd-chain fatty acids — that have been linked with health benefits for satiety, gut health and body composition.[5-8] Dietary fat plays an important role in childhood growth by helping support energy needs, brain development and absorption of fat-soluble vitamins.[9]

4 Whole and Reduced-Fat Milk and Healthy Weight in Children

A growing body of research indicates that whole and reduced-fat milk are not associated with increased risk of overweight or obesity in children. Several studies have found neutral or even beneficial associations with body composition and cardiometabolic health.[10-14]

5 Offering Milk Kids Enjoy May Improve Nutrient Intake

Taste and familiarity play an important role in children's food choices. Consumer research shows that whole and reduced-fat milk are the most commonly purchased milk types in U.S. households, indicating that many children already consume them at home.[15] Data also show that whole milk represents a larger share of milk purchases among Black, Asian and acculturated Hispanic households, with this preference especially pronounced in households with children.[16]

When schools offer milk options students recognize and enjoy, they are more likely to drink their milk, helping them to meet their daily nutrition needs to support their growth and overall health.

Please contact **American Dairy Association North East** for additional information.
https://www.americandairy.com/dairy-in-schools/programs/school-milk/

References:

1. USDA FNS: Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 – Implementation Requirements for the National School Lunch Program (January 14, 2026)
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2025). Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030 (10th ed.). https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov
3. Naveed, S., Lakka, T., & Haapala, E. A. (2020). An Overview on the Associations between Health Behaviors and Brain Health in Children and Adolescents with Special Reference to Diet Quality. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(3), 953. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17030953
4. Burrows, T., Goldman, S., Pursey, K., & Lim, R. (2016). Is there an association between dietary intake and academic achievement: A systematic review. Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, 30(2), 117–140. https://doi.org/10.1111/jhn.12407
5. Dougkas A, Barr S, Reddy S, Summerbell CD. A critical review of the role of milk and other dairy products in the development of obesity in children and adolescents. Nutr Res Rev. 2019;32(1):106-127. doi:10.1017/S0954422418000227.
6. Pokala A, Kraft J, Taormina VM, Michalski MC, Vors C, Torres-Gonzalez M, Bruno RS. Whole milk dairy foods and cardiometabolic health: dairy fat and beyond. Nutr Res. 2024 Jun;126:99-122. doi: 10.1016/j.nutres.2024.03.010.
7. Bohl M, Bjørnshave A, Larsen MK, Gregersen S, Hermansen K. The effects of proteins and medium-chain fatty acids from milk on body composition, insulin sensitivity and blood pressure in abdominally obese adults. Eur J Clin Nutr. 2017 Jan;71(1):76-82. doi: 10.1038/ejcn.2016.207.
8. Nogal A, Valdes AM, Menni C. The role of short-chain fatty acids in the interplay between gut microbiota and diet in cardio-metabolic health. Gut Microbes. 2021 Jan-Dec;13(1):1-24. doi: 10.1080/19490976.2021.
9. Muth, N. D., & Tanaka, M. (Eds.). (2023). Fats (Chapter 4) In The clinician's guide to pediatric nutrition. American Academy of Pediatrics. https://doi.org/10.1542/9781610026628-ch4
10. Vanderhout SM, Aglipay M, Torabi N, Jüni P, da Costa BR, Birken CS, O'Connor DL, Thorpe KE, Maguire JL. Whole milk compared with reduced-fat milk and childhood overweight: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Am J Clin Nutr. 2020 Feb 1;111(2):266-279. doi: 10.1093/ajcn/nqz276. PMID: 31851302; PMCID: PMC6997094.
11. Vanderhout SM, Keown-Stoneman CDG, Birken CS, O'Connor DL, Thorpe KE, Maguire JL. Cow's milk fat and child adiposity: a prospective cohort study. Int J Obes (Lond). 2021 Dec;45(12):2623-2628. doi: 10.1038/s41366-021-00948-6. Epub 2021 Aug 25. PMID: 34433906.
12. McGovern C, Rifas-Shiman SL, Switkowski KM, Woo Baidal JA, Lightdale JR, Hivert MF, Oken E, Aris IM. Association of cow's milk intake in early childhood with adiposity and cardiometabolic risk in early adolescence. Am J Clin Nutr. 2022 Aug 4;116(2):561-571. doi: 10.1093/ajcn/nqac103. PMID: 35441227; PMCID: PMC9348987.
13. O'Sullivan TA, Schmidt KA, Kratz M. Whole-Fat or Reduced-Fat Dairy Product Intake, Adiposity, and Cardiometabolic Health in Children: A Systematic Review. Adv Nutr. 2020 Jul 1;11(4):928-950. doi: 10.1093/advances/nmaa011. PMID: 32119732; PMCID: PMC7360438.
14. Lo H.W.H., Prashad M. MSc, Duncan A.M. PhD, RD, et al. Associations between Saturated Fat from Single Dairy Foods and Body Composition in Young Canadian Children. Can J Diet Pract Res. April 2025. doi:10.3148/cjdpr-2025-009.
15. Circana Group, L.P. data over 52 weeks ending 10-8-2023. Total US MULO+C.
16. Circana – Latest 52 Weeks February 25, 2024. Milk and Plant Alternative Beverage Report by Race and Ethnicity. TTL US MULO+C Panel Data.

YOUR MILK COMES FROM A GOOD PLACE
AMERICAN DAIRY ASSOCIATION NORTH EAST
NDC NATIONAL DAIRY COUNCIL