

Dairy dilemma: Which milk is right for you?

Walk down any grocery aisle and you'll see varieties of the same product. Milk is no exception. The drink can benefit our health, but when staring at the cooler, you may ask: which type is right for me? Is one healthier than another?

Noelle Park, a clinical dietitian who serves patients at OSF HealthCare, says types of milk differ based on their ingredients and nutrients.

- Cow's milk or dairy milk: This contains a lot of calcium, potassium, phosphorus and protein.
- Soy milk: Park says this contains a high amount of protein but not as much as cow's milk.
- Almond milk: This is a low-calorie option. If unsweetened, almond milk contains low amounts of protein and carbohydrates.
- Rice milk and oat milk: Park says these are low in protein and nutrients.

"Those milks were really created for people who cannot tolerate cow's milk for allergy and other reasons," Park says.

She adds that soy milk and rice milk are often good alternatives for people with celiac disease, an autoimmune disease that can cause inflammation.

What's right for me?

Park says unless a health care provider has told you otherwise, any type of milk is good to try. She says there's a misconception that people who are lactose intolerant (an inability to fully digest sugar in dairy products) can't have milk.

"We have lactase pills that help in providing the enzyme to digest the lactose," Park says.

People with chronic kidney disease should watch how much cow's milk they drink due to high levels of phosphorus and protein.

Why it's important

Park says the health benefits of milk, particularly cow's milk, include improved muscle mass and bone health. For regular milk drinkers, three cups per day is the standard. You can also get that equivalent in other dairy products. There's no hard guideline for too *much* milk in one day, but Park says the obvious: don't chug a gallon of milk for fun. You may vomit or have other issues.

Park adds that you can choose low-fat cow's milk as a healthier option. Talk to a health care provider if you have questions about what you should be eating and drinking.