

Is Chocolate Milk Good for You, or Bad?



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Bottom line

Chocolate milk is milk typically flavored with cocoa and sugar.

Though nondairy varieties exist, this article focuses on chocolate milk made with cow's milk.

It's often promoted as a great way to recover from a workout and a good alternative to regular cow's milk when trying to increase children's calcium and vitamin D intake.

However, many people wonder whether the high sugar content of the sweetened milk



Rich in nutrients

Chocolate milk is generally made by mixing cow's milk with [cocoa](#) and sweeteners like sugar or high-fructose corn syrup.

It's richer in carbs and calories than unsweetened milk but otherwise contains similar levels of nutrients. Depending on the type, 1 cup (240 ml) of chocolate milk provides ([1](#)):

- **Calories:** 180–211
- **Protein:** 8 grams
- **Carbs:** 26–32 grams
- **Sugar:** 11–17 grams
- **Fat:** 2.5–9 grams
- **Calcium:** 28% of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI)
- **Vitamin D:** 25% of the RDI
- **Riboflavin:** 24% of the RDI
- **Potassium:** 12% of the RDI
- **Phosphorus:** 25% of the RDI

Chocolate milk also contains smaller amounts of zinc, selenium, iodine, magnesium, and vitamins A, B1, B6, B12.

Milk is considered a complete protein — meaning it provides all nine [essential amino acids](#) your body needs.

It's particularly rich in leucine, which seems to be the amino acid most involved in building and maintaining strong muscles ([2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)).

Milk is also rich in conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a type of omega-6 fat found in meat and dairy, particularly from grass-fed animals. Some studies suggest that CLA may offer small weight loss benefits — though not all studies agree ([6](#), [7](#), [8](#)).

On the other hand, because it's sweetened, chocolate milk contains 1.5–2 times more sugar than unsweetened cow's milk (1).

Most health authorities recommend limiting added sugars to less than 5–10% of your daily calorie intake — or less than 10 teaspoons of added sugar per day for the average adult.

One cup (240 ml) of chocolate milk can contain up to 3 teaspoons of added sugar. So drinking too much can easily cause you to exceed this recommendation (9, 10).

SUMMARY

Chocolate milk can provide you with the same nutrients found in regular cow's milk. However, it also contains more calories and 1.5–2 times more sugar than unsweetened cow's milk.

Beneficial to bone health

Chocolate milk is rich in calcium — the main mineral present in your bones.

Dairy is the biggest source of dietary calcium in the United States and Canada — providing around 72% of the average person's daily calcium intake. The remainder comes from vegetables, grains, legumes, fruit, meat, poultry, fish, and eggs (11).

The calcium in dairy is easily absorbable. Researchers believe this may be the main reason why dairy is consistently linked to the development of [strong bones](#) in children and adolescents (12).

Milk is also rich in protein and phosphorus, as well as often fortified with vitamin D — all of which are additional nutrients important for building and maintaining strong bones and teeth (11, 13, 14).

This may explain why many studies link the consumption of milk and dairy products to lower risks of fractures and bone diseases, such as osteoporosis — especially in older adults (15, 16, 17).

That said, these nutrients aren't exclusive to dairy. Other [calcium-rich foods](#) include legumes, nuts, seeds, seaweed, leafy greens, blackstrap molasses, and some types of tofu.

Several foods are also commonly fortified in calcium and vitamin D, including some types of cereal and juice, as well as certain plant milks and yogurts.

SUMMARY

Milk is rich in calcium, protein, phosphorus, and vitamin D. These nutrients are instrumental in building and maintaining strong bones and may protect your bones as you age.

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May help you recover from workouts

Chocolate milk may help your muscles recover after a grueling workout.

That's because beverages rich in carbs and [protein](#) are particularly effective at replenishing the sugars, fluids, and electrolytes lost during exercise (18).

This may explain why chocolate milk is often promoted as a great recovery drink. That said, most studies showing benefits are done on athletes whose workouts are typically more intense and frequent than the average exerciser.

Because of this, it's unclear to what extent nonathletes benefit from drinking chocolate milk to [recover from a workout](#) (19, 20).

What's more, the benefits aren't exclusive to chocolate milk.

A review of 12 studies reported that chocolate milk was no more effective than other carb- and protein-rich beverages at improving post-exercise recovery markers, such as serum lactate and serum creatine kinase (CK) (21).

Therefore, a homemade smoothie — or other well-balanced meals or snacks — are likely just as effective at helping your muscles recover from your workout while being much more nutritious.

SUMMARY

Chocolate milk offers a combination of protein and carbs that may help boost your body's ability to recover after workouts. However, well-balanced meals or snacks are likely more nutritious and equally effective options.

Downsides of chocolate milk

Drinking chocolate milk regularly may have several downsides.

Rich in added sugars

Typically, about half of the carbs found in chocolate milk come from added sugars. Some brands use [high-fructose corn syrup](#) (HFCS), a type of sweetener that has been linked to obesity and diabetes (22).

Most health authorities recommend that adults and children limit their intake of added sugars.

For instance, the American Heart Association (AHA) recommends that women and children consume less than 100 calories — or 6 teaspoons — of added sugar per day whereas men

should aim for less than 150 calories or 9 teaspoons per day (10).

One cup (240 ml) of chocolate milk generally contains 11–17 grams of [added sugar](#) — about 3–4 teaspoons. That’s already up to a third of the average man’s and more than half of women’s and children’s daily upper limit (1).

Excessive intake of added sugars is linked to weight gain and a higher risk of chronic conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and even certain types of cancers (23, 24, 25, 26).

Diets rich in added sugars have also been associated with acne, dental caries, and an increased risk of depression (27, 28, 29).

Not everyone can tolerate it

Chocolate milk contains [lactose](#), a natural sugar found in milk and other dairy products.

Many people worldwide cannot digest lactose and experience gas, cramping, or diarrhea whenever dairy is consumed (30, 31).

Moreover, some people are allergic to milk or develop chronic constipation when drinking it. This is more common in young children than in adults (32, 33).

SUMMARY

Chocolate milk is high in sugar and lactose, a protein that many people are unable to digest. Milk allergy is also common — especially in young children.

May increase your risk of certain diseases

Chocolate milk may increase your risk of certain conditions, such as heart disease and certain cancers.

May contribute to heart disease

Chocolate milk is high in saturated fat and added sugars, which may negatively impact [heart health](#).

For example, research shows that consuming 17–21% of calories from added sugar may increase your risk of heart disease by 38%, compared to consuming less than 8% of calories from added sugar ([34](#)).

What's more, added sugar has been found to increase heart disease risk in children through increasing calorie intake and body fat. It also elevates heart disease risk factors, such as LDL (bad) cholesterol and triglyceride levels ([35](#)).

Though some scientists have started questioning the role of saturated fat in heart disease, most experts agree that diets high in this type of fat increase risk factors for heart disease. ([36](#)).

Additionally, research shows that replacing [saturated fat](#) with other fats is likely beneficial to the health of your heart ([37](#)).

For example, a 20-year study reported that replacing fat from dairy with an equivalent amount of polyunsaturated fat — found in foods like fatty fish and nuts — reduced heart disease risk by 24% ([38](#)).

Similarly, another large study observed that replacing as little as 1% of calories from saturated fats by the same amount of calories from unsaturated fats, whole grains, or plant proteins may decrease heart disease risk by 5–8% ([39](#)).

May be linked to certain cancers

In some cases, diets rich in milk and other dairy products have been linked to an increased risk of certain types of cancer.

For instance, a recent review of 11 studies in over 700,000 people, found that men with high intakes of dairy — especially from whole milk — may be 1.5 times more likely to die from prostate cancer (40).

Similarly, another recent review of 34 studies linked dairy consumption to a 20% higher risk of stomach cancer (41).

However, other studies observed no link between milk or [dairy intake and cancer risk](#). In some cases, dairy even appears to offer small protective effects against colorectal, bladder, breast, pancreatic, ovarian, and lung cancers (42, 43, 44).

What's more, diets high in added sugars have been linked to an increased risk of certain cancers including esophageal cancer and cancer of the pleura, a membrane that covers the lungs (45).

Though some research indicates that certain types of milk may elevate your risk of certain cancers, more studies exploring these associations are needed before strong conclusions can be made.

SUMMARY

Chocolate milk is rich in added sugars and may increase your risk of various conditions, including heart disease and certain cancers. Still, research is not conclusive.

Should you drink chocolate milk?

Chocolate milk provides important nutrients — such as calcium, protein, and [vitamin D](#) — which may benefit health. However, it's high in calories and added sugar, which can contribute to weight gain and may increase your risk of certain chronic diseases.

Chocolate milk intake should be closely monitored in children. Too much can contribute to obesity, cavities, and other health issues in kids (46, 47).

Though chocolate milk is a tasty beverage, it should be considered more of a dessert than a beverage for children and adults alike.

SUMMARY

Chocolate milk is high in calories and added sugar and should be consumed in moderation.

The bottom line

Chocolate milk offers the same nutrients as [cow's milk](#) but packs a hefty dose of added sugar.

This beverage may offer some benefits to your muscles and bones — but may also promote conditions like heart disease in adults and [obesity](#) in children due to its sugar content.

Therefore, chocolate milk is best enjoyed in moderation as an occasional treat rather than consumed on a daily basis.