DATE: March 4, 2020
TO: WIC Coordinators & Local Agency Staff
FROM: Carole Kelnofer, Training Coordinator
SUBJECT: Milk Alternatives: Not all are Created Equal – Topic of the Month

Walking into a grocery store today you can find many different milk alternatives, but how do they really compare to cow’s milk? Let’s consider that most plant-based milks are NOT recommended for children under age 5.

Research shows that drinking milk can have a beneficial impact on health and healthy behaviors. WIC provides cow milk and other dairy products to participants over one year of age. WIC also provides soy beverage and tofu as milk alternatives for participants who do not use milk due to milk allergy, lactose intolerance, vegetarian/vegan diet, cultural/lifestyle practice, or religious observance.

WIC-allowed cow’s milk:
- Available in regular or lactose-free
- A natural source of calcium, B12, and potassium
- Contains many other essential vitamins and minerals our body needs
- An excellent source of protein
- Fortified with Vitamin D

Only fortified soy beverages, such as the WIC options, are considered adequate nutritional equivalents for dairy milk in terms of calcium, protein, and vitamin D. Some milk alternatives may have nutrients added, but fortification amounts vary widely, and not all of the nutrients naturally occurring in cow milk are added to milk alternatives. Additionally, the bioavailability of added nutrients is unknown; evidence suggests that our bodies may not absorb these nutrients as well as they can from dairy sources.

Cow milk has no “added sugars”. Flavored milk alternatives also contain added sugars and other sweeteners. The American Heart Association has recommended avoiding sweetened milk beverages to minimize the intake of added sugars that contribute to a preference for sweet tastes, and negatively impact nutrient intake and diet quality.
Review the comparison chart to enhance your knowledge on how cow's milk compares to milk alternatives. (This updated list originally appeared in the October 21, 2015 TOM-Milk and Milk Alternatives.)

### Not All Milk Alternatives Are Created Equal

**Nutrient Comparisons for Fortified Milk Alternatives - per 1 Cup**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Milk</th>
<th>Protein (grams)</th>
<th>Total Fat (grams)</th>
<th>Added Sugar (grams)</th>
<th>Calcium</th>
<th>Vitamin D</th>
<th>Lactose Free</th>
<th>Safe for Nut or Soy Allergy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cow</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whole</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>2%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1%</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skim</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lactose Free</strong></td>
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<td>Whole</td>
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<td>Skim</td>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Hemp Flax</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Typical amounts listed. Specific nutrient content will vary by brand. Numbers are rounded to the next whole number.

Most plant-based milks are NOT recommended for children under age 5. See Healthy Drinks Factsheet.

**Nutrient information source:** USDA Food Data Central; Food Allergy Institute; Healthy Drinks Healthy Kids
Parents want to choose the best for their children. WIC staff can use Participant Centered Services (PCS) to counsel and educate participants. Knowing the facts provides families with the information they need to make the healthiest choice.

**PRACTICE ACTIVITY: Educating Participants using PCS Counseling Skills.**

Below is a scenario of common questions regarding milk and milk alternatives that you may hear from participants.

- **READ** through the scenario.
- **PRACTICE** on your own or with a partner.
- **SHARE** your knowledge and skills with your the next participant.

**Participant:** “My family prefers to avoid animal products, so cow’s milk is not an option for us.”

**CPA:** I understand that your family has chosen not consume animal based milk products. You’ve found what works best for your family.

**Participant:** I try to. Does WIC offer anything other than cow’s milk?

**CPA:** Sure, I’d be happy to share what WIC allowed choices are included on the food list.

**FACT:** WIC provides soy beverage as an alternative to dairy products. The WIC allowed soy beverage is considered an adequate nutritional equivalent for dairy milk in terms of calcium, protein, vitamin D, and other nutrients.

**Participant:** “That’s great! It’s just that I’ve heard milk alternatives are better for my child’s health. Since they are plant-based, there is no risk of added hormones.”

**CPA:** You’re really interested in your child’s health! Would it be okay if I share what the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says about offering milk alternatives to children?

**FACT:** Families that choose milk alternatives should know that plant-based “milks” are not recommended for children under age 5. With the exception of WIC allowed soy beverage, most plant-based milks are not nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk, often have many additives, and can be expensive. Additionally, the flavored plant-based milks can have a high sugar content.

**Participant:** “Hmmm...but, my child won’t drink the unflavored soy. Also, I’ve read that almond milk is better for you.”

**CPA:** I’m hearing you say it’s difficult to adjust to the taste of unflavored milk beverage and you really want to make a healthy choice for your child.

**FACT:** Almond beverage, even the flavored ones, do not have the recommended amounts of protein compared to the WIC-approved soy beverages. Flavored milk is also very high in sugar,
which can lead to increased preference for other sweet tasting drinks and foods. This can make it harder to get your child to eat unsweetened foods at other times.

Participant: “That is a good point. However, I had a hard time getting my family to drink some milks and I tried mixing it in smoothies but we can’t do that every day. I found we enjoy the almond milk because it is a bit thicker.”

CPA: It’s great that you have found different ways to get your family to enjoy the benefits of a milk beverage. Could I share what I’ve learned about the thickening of almond beverages?

FACT: Almond milk contains very little nutritional benefits of the actual almond. It is made by grinding the nuts with water and extracting the liquid. The process of thickening the beverage is typically done with an additive that adds no nutritive value to the product. The drink is low in calories but also low in nutrients. Although many products have added nutrients, the almond beverage is not nutritionally equivalent to milk.

Participant: Well. You really have given me a lot to think about today. I suppose I could try the plain soy with my family again. I think I would like the soy milk on my WIC food package today.

CPA: Great. I can make that change for you. Any goals you would like to set with trying the soy beverage?

Participant: Umm, I plan to try offering the soy beverage everyday with dinner for the next month. I am hoping that overtime my child will adjust to the flavor.

CPA: That’s a great idea. I will be happy to follow up with you at your next visit so I can see how it went. If you have any questions before then just give us a call.

Resources:
- Healthy Drinks, Healthy Kids; HealthyDrinksHealthyKids.org
- WIC Documentation Required for Soy Foods
- Consensus report on healthy beverages for 0-5 year olds; AAP News, September 2019
- Participant Centered Service Skill Building; PCS Counseling Skills
- Topic of the Month: Milk and Milk Alternatives; October 21, 2015