

Making Ripples

Milk Madness

by Amanda Bancroft

Is Santa lactose intolerant? The world may never know. But not all of the milk and cookies Santa receives this year will be dairy-based. About half of all American adults don't drink dairy milk, according to the trade journal Dairy Today. Even though 90 percent of US adults can drink milk, about 75 percent of the world's adult population is lactose intolerant.

We are fortunate to be inundated with various kinds of milk that contain a multitude of health benefits, although some of them are either known or suspected (depending on the type of milk and research results) to contribute to disease. Among the varieties available to humans include the dairy milks from cows, goats, sheep, yak, donkey, horse, camel, water buffalo, and reindeer. Yes, Santa might be milking those flying reindeer for more than just transportation!

Some of these dairy milks are commonly produced as whole milk, partly skimmed milk, skim milk, buttermilk and raw milk. There are also organic milk products of many flavors, lactose-free milk, fat-free milk, and low-fat milk. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Worldwide, dairy farms produced about 730 million tons of milk in 2011, from 260 million dairy cows."

For many people, non-dairy milk is best, and the harm caused to dairy cows is a top concern among vegans and milk lovers alike. But vegans are not the only ones who avoid dairy. Those who are lactose intolerant, allergic to casein (the protein found in dairy milk), or who have certain health problems exacerbated by the consumption of dairy, may also choose a non-dairy beverage whether it's for their cereal or creamer for their coffee.

Non-dairy milks include soy, almond, hemp, sunflower, and coconut. Each type of dairy or non-dairy milk does effect the environment, with varying degrees of harm. So while animal agriculture isn't famous for its eco-friendly practices, vegan milks may be less harmful rather than harmless to our planet.

While the decision of what kind of milk to drink is yours and yours alone, it's worth your time to look into the volumes of research comparing these choices. Many people assume that, for example, cow's milk is the healthiest and best option for most people, period – a wonder beverage of sorts. But that belief actually began in the United States during the 1930's with federally subsidized dairy advertising, rather than direct-from-science research.

Cow's milk has many benefits, but according to more than a half-dozen recent studies such as the ones published in November of this year by the New York Times, cow's milk consumption in adults doesn't protect against fractures, and is associated with increased incidence of certain diseases. So it's best to do the research and make the decision for yourself (and Santa) rather than relying on a commercial to tell you the facts. Which kind of milk and cookies will your family leave for Santa this year?

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