



Milk Matters

a column by **Joseph O'Donnell**

Milk: Great equalizer in obesity fight

I was looking at some interesting numbers the other day about the obesity/diabetes epidemic we currently face. It seems, surprisingly enough, this epidemic is not limited to the U.S. with its unlimited food choices but also is affecting poor African countries where food options are limited and often nonexistent. This caused a lot of head scratching.

What could be the common denominator? Health professionals today have a great knowledge of classic nutritional deficiencies — maybe this obesity crisis represents a new kind of deficiency, something like the old vitamin and mineral shortages of the past but more complex and interactive with obesity as a symptom rather than skin lesions, bone deformities or blindness.

Bodies need a balance

Scientists and most laypeople know that our bodies need a balanced diet for optimal health. In areas where a balanced diet is unavailable but calories are abundant — such as poor countries that have access to a lot of grains or roots but little else — the body senses something is missing. It does not suppress the appetite such that people are driven to eat excess calories as their bodies search for balance. It's like fishing in a lake with no fish — you keep baiting the hook but you never catch anything.

It's possible the same thing is happening in the U.S. Despite our abundance of food choices,

we often make the wrong ones and go down the same path. Maybe we are creating an endless cycle — craving certain nutrients not present in our current diet, our bodies drive us to keep eating more and more of the same poor food choices that got us into this mess in the first place.

All of this head scratching was making me a little thin on the top but I kept digging into the numbers. Kids (and adults) today drink an average of about three cans of soft drinks daily. Coupled with a supersized serving of greasy French fries, this can add up to more than 1,000 calories each day of nutrient poor food. Kept up day after day as is often the case in the U.S., this could clearly put us into a nutritionally imbalanced position just like the people in poorer countries. In our case, we choose our foods from an abundant array, for them, they either eat from their limited choice or go hungry. The bottom line is the same — imbalanced diets drive us to keep eating as our bodies' search for missing nutrients. The more calories we put in — especially empty calories — the closer we get to obesity and developing related diseases like diabetes.

Clearly this is all speculation on my part. Some scientist may be working on this very idea in a research lab somewhere but it isn't mainstream. Where does it fit into a dairy magazine? Interestingly enough, it's not too much of a

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FYI

Dr. Joseph O'Donnell is Executive Director of the *California Dairy Research Foundation*. He can be reached at 530-753-0681.

Information on the *California Dairy Research Foundation* can be obtained from the organization's Web site at www.cdrf.org.

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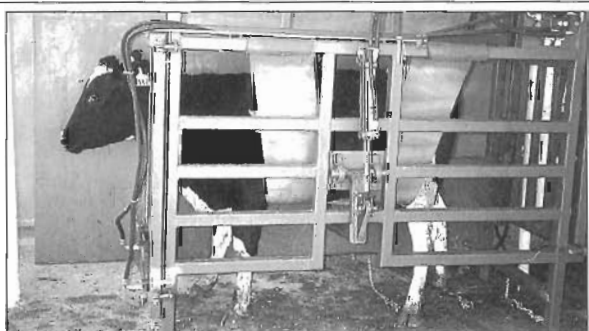
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leap. After all, new studies are linking dairy to weight management.

It seems that people who eat dairy tend to be leaner than people who do not. That is a fact. So here's a little more speculation for the mix — maybe, by including milk in the diet, nutritional balance is achieved and the body doesn't need to search for missing nutrients through consuming empty calories.

Most people know milk and dairy products are healthy foods. In fact, they are the most nutritionally complete foods on the planet. Milk was designed by nature for the single purpose of delivering nutrition and health. If you think about it, it is pretty difficult to have an imbalanced diet if you are also consuming three servings of milk a day. Also, if we are drinking milk at meals, we won't be drinking soft drinks and we'll displace all of those empty sugar calories with nature's finest food.

Get house in order

Once we get our own house in order, if we could only send a similar message — and the dairy products behind it — to the people in Africa, perhaps it could answer their rising health crisis as well. If they can't tolerate milk, we could send yogurt or cheese or develop a dairy product that would fit in with their culture. I believe by doing so we could improve the nutritional status of their population greatly — whether we are talking about obesity or starvation or anything in between.

Lowering incidence of obesity

The United States is the greatest producer of agricultural products in the world — especially dairy products. The science tells us that including dairy products in the diet lowers the incidence of obesity. Milk is a commodity that could be readily available throughout the world thus improving the nutritional status of the global population.

My grandmother always said, "Drink your milk and sit up straight!" She wasn't educated, but she sure knew a lot. Obesity is just one highly visible nutritional issue that can be relieved by dairy products ... GOT MILK? ■