



Nutrition issue simmers over milk products

The choice to eat certain foods is becoming mired in political correctness. Although it is important to the advancement of a tolerant society, political correctness can be taken to an excessive level that is detrimental to the health of the supposedly sensitive group.

In the May/June issue of the journal *Nutrition Today*, a group of renowned nutrition scientists addressed the political correctness of recommending milk to a culturally diverse population. They point out that although milk and milk products have well-documented health benefits, they have become politically challenged foods due to the actions of some interest groups.

Question: How did the milk dilemma develop?

Answer: The *Nutrition Today* articles point to animal rights groups that place "the priority of animal rights over the public health." Some have claimed it is culturally inappropriate to recommend milk products as a food group because about one-third of the U.S. population is composed of

blacks, Asians and Hispanics who may not traditionally consume milk and are more likely to be lactose intolerant.

Most commonly, lactose intolerance causes symptoms such as gassiness, abdominal discomfort and loose stools.

The sugar lactose is high in human milk, and we are all born with the ability to produce an enzyme called lactase that digests lactose in the intestine. People of all races experience a decline in lactase production between ages 3 and 5, but this does not make a person unable to handle moderate amounts of lactose.

Q: Is milk consumed in African and Asian countries?

A: Milk is common in many parts of Africa, and studies have shown that even malnourished Africans can consume milk without problems. Asians are often identified as being the most lactose intolerant of all racial groups, yet for almost 50 years, Japan has served milk in school meals. China started a school milk program a few years ago that is one of the largest ever undertaken. Some dis-

tricts in China produce and consume significant amounts of milk, and people in those districts have greater bone-mineral density than those in districts without milk.

Q: What type of dietary guidance should you expect from health professionals?

A: A health professional's primary responsibility is to provide reliable scientific information and allow clients to make educated decisions. Connie Weaver, distinguished professor and head of the Department of Foods and Nutrition at Purdue University, stated in her editorial article, "If we worry about cultural sensitivities more than we worry about giving sound nutritional advice, we put one-third of our population at risk."

In other words, although not recommending milk products to blacks, Asians and Hispanics may be perceived by some to be culturally sensitive, others see it as racial discrimination that can have serious long-term health consequences.

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