

Public-health efforts continue to focus on restricting foods

Public-health efforts are increasingly working to control eating environments and foods, particularly targeting foods served to schoolchildren. For example, some school districts are eliminating flavored milk due to its higher sugar content. Although research shows that flavored milk is associated with higher nutrient intakes among children and does not contribute to weight issues, the added sugars, sodium and fat are a focus of concern.

Similarly, there are moves across venues—from retail to vending to restaurants—to increase offerings of whole grains, fruits and vegetables while lowering sodium, calorie and fat content in foods to prevent diet-related diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and obesity. Retail labeling efforts often highlight the fat, sodium and added sugar content of foods and focus on what to avoid versus what components of foods, such as vitamins and minerals, contribute to our health.

In a major switch of policy, the proposed 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans concentrate on preventing disease versus promoting health, as they have done in the past, and seek to recommend intakes of sodium limited to 1,500 mg per day—a decrease from the current recommendation for 2,300 mg per day. Many health professionals have voiced concern that a lower sodium intake level will be very difficult to achieve, due to the foods available in retail and restaurant settings. These health professionals are calling for foods to be reformulated to contain less sugar, sodium and fat, and for consumers to choose less highly processed foods and more

whole foods. On a positive front, the proposed 2010 Dietary Guidelines point out four shortfall nutrients in the American diet, and milk provides three of the four, including calcium, potassium and vitamin D.

Some health professionals acknowledge and advocate that taste, culture, tradition, food preferences, economics, disease risk and health goals are all factors that cannot be ignored in food-choice decisions, leading to the need for an “inclusion” versus an “exclusion” philosophy around foods and nutrition. This matches Dairy Council’s philosophy of helping individuals make long-term behavior change that supports good health.

Sustainability efforts pick up steam; dairy strategically positioned

Sustainability is a growing factor in food-choice decisions, with 70 percent of consumers now considering production practices when choosing their foods. One of the drivers of the sustainability movement is the predicted 50 percent increase in world population in the next 40 years and the resulting need to produce more food using fewer resources. Currently, carbon footprint is often the focus of sustainability concerns. Media messages to lower our carbon footprint concentrate on reducing consumption of animal products, purchasing and eating locally grown foods and avoiding processed foods. The food industry, including dairy, is working to develop strong science that brings factual data to these discussions. The food industry is also developing guidelines to lower the carbon footprint of foods produced. This could be through improving

efficiency of production and processing practices, making packaging more eco-friendly, reducing miles traveled to retail, minimizing energy used to cook/process foods in home and restaurants and reducing waste.

Although sustainability is a growing factor in food-choice decisions, the conversation is starting to broaden beyond simply environmental costs to nutritional dividends. To this end, researchers in Sweden have developed a “Nutrient Density-to-Climate Impact” index that factors nutrient contributions into the quantification of a food’s carbon footprint. Not surprisingly, milk scored above all other beverages assessed, due to its high level of nutrients. Consumers and health professionals alike will need to be educated about the multitude of factors involved in food choices and how to prioritize these based on individual needs and goals.

Research on probiotics and protein—both positives for dairy—proves beneficial to health

Probiotics are getting lots of positive play for their role in improving immunity and intestinal health, reducing serum cholesterol levels, preventing colon cancer and improving symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease. Studies are looking at specific strains and species of probiotics, at both preventative and therapeutic effects, and at different food carriers for probiotics beyond yogurt. More and more probiotic-containing products are on the market. Regulation of these products is expected to increase, which will be positive for consumer confidence in product claims and health effects. Education around the benefits of probiotics remains an opportunity for the dairy industry, particularly as yogurt remains the traditional carrier of these healthy bacteria.

Protein is also getting considerable attention for its ability to control appetite, optimize muscle mass, help with blood glucose control, weight management, sports recovery and even bone health. Consumers are reacting by increasing their protein intakes and seeking out products that boast “high quality” protein, such as whey protein. Research recommends spreading protein intake throughout the day, consuming approximately equal amounts at each meal rather than our current habit of end-loading our day with protein, primarily at the dinner meal. This could lead to some dietary-pattern changes as consumers incorporate more high-protein foods, such as milk, yogurt and cheese, into their breakfast and lunch meals.

Through our ongoing trends-identification process, Dairy Council of California paints a picture of the environment in which we operate and identifies issues we must address in order to be effective and influential. The trends identified form our annual and long-range operational plans geared at educating the health professional, educator and consumer audiences about the health benefits of dairy products, including the advantages covered in this trends report.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Produced twice annually by Dairy Council of California, the TRENDS newsletter updates industry leaders on emerging nutrition issues likely to have a positive or negative effect upon the dairy industry. The trends tracking system, monitored by a team of staffers, is designed to identify issues early and track their development through multiple communication channels. Analysis is done biannually on the issues. For more information or to receive a hard copy of the TRENDS newsletter, please contact Kendall House at khouse@dairycouncilofca.org.