

Top 3 Reasons Cheese Is Important in Child Nutrition Programs

The Dietary Guidelines, numerous health organizations and the latest science support the continued role of cheese as a core component of child nutrition programs as well as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

Cheese is a nutritious food that nourishes growing children

- As a good source of high quality, easily digestible protein,¹ cheese is considered a meat/meat alternative by National School Lunch Program, and can be served as an ounce-for-ounce substitute for meat.² Cheese can also, in some cases, be substituted for fluid milk in the WIC programs.³
- Some types of cheese are excellent sources of calcium, delivering 27% of the mineral in the US food supply.⁴ (One and a half ounces of some natural cheese contains approximately 300 mg of calcium, the equivalent of 1 cup of milk.)
- A study found that children and adolescents who consume more than one serving of cheese a day have higher calcium intakes than most children who consume less. Cheese consumption is also associated with overall dairy intake.⁵

Cheese is part of a healthy eating pattern

- As a result of a restrictive approach in some localities, some nutritious foods, like cheese, are at risk of being unintentionally eliminated, because of the saturated fat and sodium content. However, as illustrated by the USDA's *MyPyramid for Kids*, the long-term health of children and adolescents can best be achieved by moderate consumption of a variety of nutrient-rich foods among and within the major food groups, including low-fat and fat-free dairy foods.
- A recent study found that children who consume the most cheese, have the lowest sugar intakes.⁵
- Adding cheese to vegetables, sandwiches and soups helps make foods from the other Food Groups to Encourage, like vegetables and whole grains, more appealing to children.⁶

Cheese is considered a healthy snack food for school children

- The School Nutrition Association has developed nutrition recommendations for foods sold outside reimbursable meals and allows up to 1 ounce of cheese per serving.⁷ Because it is rich in nutrients, cheese is exempt from fat and saturated fat standards and it is considered a "tier 1" (more healthful) food.
- The Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG)⁸ also has developed a voluntary set of recommendations for competitive foods in schools, and has included reduced-fat and part-skim cheese, nuts, nut butters and seeds as part of their Healthy Schools Program. The AHG also exempts reduced-fat and part-skim cheese from saturated fat and sodium limits (as required for other snack foods), so schools can offer up to 1.5-ounce servings of cheese as a qualified snack food.
- Cheese may help prevent the formation of dental caries⁹ and is recommended as a healthful snack by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.¹⁰

References

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- 5 ENVIRON. Nutrient intakes by children and adolescents in the United States by level of cheese consumption and related patterns of intake. (2008)
- 6 Stroebele N, Barz R, Wittrock D, Lesh L, Hill J. A "small changes" approach to improving the nutrition quality of school menu items. *J of Child Nutr Management* 2006;2, Fall.
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- 9 Kashket S, DePaola DP. Cheese consumption and the development and progression of dental caries. *Nutr Rev* 2002;60(4):97-103.
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