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Winston J. Craig

Andrews University, wrcraig@andrews.edu

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Plant-based milks should be fortified with calcium, vitamins D and B12.

Popular Alternatives

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

Almond and rice milk contain only 1 gram of protein per cup.

While cow milk sales have gently fallen during the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in choosing tasty, alternative beverages to cow milk. Various reasons guide such choices. These include concerns about lactose intolerance (35–50 million Americans are thought to be lactose intolerant, including 9 out of every 10 Asian Americans), allergies to dairy, the antibiotics and growth hormones given to cows, and a desire to seek foods that are lower in saturated fat. For some people, it is a matter of making a plant-based choice.

The environmental impact of beverages is also a consumer concern. Plant-based beverages have a smaller carbon footprint than dairy milk. The production and packaging of cow milk is associated with 2.5 times the greenhouse gas emissions than that of soy milk production and packaging. In addition, a gallon of cow milk requires four times more water to produce than a gallon of soy, almond or rice milk. Furthermore, many of the plant beverages are organic and are listed as “GM free” (genetically modified free).

Total retail sales of soy, almond, rice and other plant milks reached \$1.22 billion in 2011. Last year, soy milk accounted for 69 percent of the dairy alternative market, almond milk 21 percent, rice milk 7 percent, and coconut milk 3 percent. The sale of dairy alternatives is expected to continue significant growth during the next five years. Each one of these beverages has its own distinctive flavor, and the nutritional profile varies.

The dairy alternatives can be used on cereal or in your favorite recipe, or for making popular smoothies. Because some consumers have been influenced by the unwarranted negative press about soy, they have switched to almond milk as a tasty, healthy and nutritious alternative. The market for almond milk is presently growing at an impressive 50 percent.



The fortified beverages are often touted for their nutritional advantages, having less saturated fat (except coconut milk), lower calories (some almond milks have 25 percent fewer calories than dairy skim milk), zero cholesterol, no high fructose corn syrup, and higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids. One variety of Silk actually has 32 mg of the omega-3 fatty acid (DHA) required for brain function. Soy is also recommended as a heart-healthy choice due to its content of health-promoting isoflavones. In selecting a plant beverage, choose one that contains 7 or less grams of sugar per serving. While soy beverages contain a good 7 grams of protein per cup, the almond, rice and coconut beverages contain a mere 1 gram of protein per serving.

A plant-based beverage should not be used for infant feeding. The beverage should provide at least 25–30 percent of the recommended daily value (%DV) of vitamin B12, vitamin D and calcium, nutrients which may be hard to get in a vegetarian diet without using dairy. Those that are not fortified as such should not be used for growing children. Homemade soy milk also lacks the fortification necessary for it to be considered a nutritious beverage.

Winston J. Craig, Ph.D., RD, is chair of the Department of Nutrition at Andrews University.