

RIPPE: Chocolate milk battleground

Too many calories, not sugar type, is what really matters

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By Dr. James Rippe - The Washington Times

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Illustration: Food police by Linas Garsys for The Washington Times

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"Suddenly, everyone who eats is a nutritionist," said the director of food and nutrition services for Fairfax County Schools. She said this to a local reporter recently, describing the ongoing uproar over serving chocolate milk to schoolchildren amid concerns about childhood obesity.

Bowing to public pressure, school officials in the Virginia county banned chocolate milk from elementary school lunchrooms last year, only to announce that they will replace it next month with a new version - this time made with sugar instead of high fructose corn syrup, even though the latter is nutritionally equivalent and more economical than sugar.

Fairfax isn't alone among area schools in taking on chocolate milk. District of Columbia Public Schools banned it last year and it has been on the radar screen of others around the country, including schools in Los Angeles, Florida and Colorado.

Chocolate milk has become the prime target du jour in the national childhood obesity debate. And the Fairfax "solution" to the outcry from parents angered at the bans - allowing flavored milks back into lunchrooms but flavored with sugar - appears to be gaining steam. But it is not a credible solution for parents concerned about sugar intake. Nor is it a solution grounded in science.

We all eat and we all have an opinion. However, an opinion a nutritionist does not make. With school nurses, school board members, food service directors and parents all weighing in, lost in the cacophony are a few basic facts.

First, a sugar is a sugar is a sugar. High fructose corn syrup is sugar made from corn, just like sucrose - or table sugar - is sugar made from sugar cane or beets. Compositionally, table sugar and corn sugar are nearly identical, roughly half glucose and half fructose. They are nutritionally the same. They have the same number of calories and our bodies handle them the same way.

Second, while the U.S. Department of Agriculture is absolutely right - Americans should cut back on calories overall, including added sugars - sugars can actually play a valuable role in our diet. How? By putting them to work, using the sugars we do consume to get the nutrients we should consume; in cereals and grains, proteins, fruits, vegetables and yes, dairy, including milk. Faced with a bowl of shredded wheat, most of us immediately understand this.

Third, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, barely 40 percent of children ages six to 11 receive the recommended daily calcium they need for their bones and teeth to grow properly. The story is worse for teenagers, with only 10 percent of girls ages 12 to 19 getting enough calcium and 30 percent of boys in that same age range.

The situation appears to go from bad to worse when chocolate milk is pulled from schools.

According to a 2009 survey of 58 elementary and secondary schools across the country by the Milk Processor Education Program, kids' consumption of milk overall dropped an astonishing average of 35 percent when chocolate milk was dropped from the menu.

As is often the case, when it comes to chocolate milk, a few loud voices are carrying the day. This should not be the case. It is time for the reasoned majority to speak up.

We don't just have an obesity crisis in this country. As Agriculture Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack has pointed out, we also have a "crisis of poor diets." This crisis threatens the health and the future of our children. While we should indeed be reasonable about the amount of sweets our kids eat, let's not deprive them of the nutrients they need by pulling chocolate milk from lunch rooms or spending scarce resources on a more expensive sweetener.

Dr. James Rippe is an adviser to the food and beverage industry, including the Corn Refiners Association. He is the founder of the Rippe Lifestyle Institute and professor of biomedical sciences at the University of Central Florida.