

EarthTalk™

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Dear EarthTalk: There seems to be a large selection of soy and other non-dairy milks out there today, even right in the dairy sections of major supermarkets. Why should I opt for soymilk over cow's milk and how do I get the calcium I would lose? -- Barbara Conant, Tacoma, Washington

There is a lot of debate about whether or not cow's milk is good — or appropriate — for people at all. On the plus side, it is a valuable source of protein, as well as calcium, necessary to help build bones and keep them strong.

Some researchers believe that drinking cow's milk reduces the risk of kidney stones, colon cancer and other health problems. But others counter that the saturated fats in cow's milk are big contributors to America's weight problems, let alone high cholesterol levels and artery blockage.

Famed pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, in the last edition of his best selling "Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care," argued that cow's milk was for baby cows not human children, suggesting that it may be a factor in childhood onset diabetes and in kids' respiratory and ear problems. He encouraged mothers to give infants only human breast milk and to consider soy and rice milk products for older kids.

Chief among available alternatives to cow's milk is soymilk, which has about the same amount of protein but much more fiber than cow's

milk. In striking contrast with cow's milk, soymilk actually reduces the body's cholesterol levels.

It also contains isoflavones, natural plant hormones that act as antioxidants and have been linked to many human health benefits including the easing of menopause symptoms, protection against prostate problems, better bone health and even a reduction in heart disease and cancer risks.

Many people assume that soymilk has less calcium than cow's milk, which is true—in its pure form, soymilk has only a sixth of the calcium of an equal amount of cow's milk. But producers address this problem by simply fortifying soymilks with calcium to equal the amount in cow's milk. And studies have shown that most people's bodies absorb 75 percent more calcium from soymilk than from cow's milk.

But while the health benefits of soymilk are substantial, it may not be for everyone. Dr. Joseph Mercola, who runs one of the most highly trafficked natural health websites, warns that soymilk can inhibit thyroid performance, so those with pre-existing thyroid issues might want to avoid it. Also, some researchers have shown that soymilk can inhibit the body's absorption of protein and minerals in some cases.

Other tasty and healthy alternatives to cow's milk include those made from rice, almonds, oats—and even hemp. According to the health and wellness website Sixwise.com, almond milk is rich in magnesium, potassium, manganese, copper, the antioxidants vitamin E and selenium, and calcium and "may be one of the more nutritious milk



Tasty and healthy alternatives to cow's milk include those made from soy, rice, almonds, oats -- and even hemp. (Photo by cafemama, courtesy Flickr)

alternatives on the market."

Almond milk is very low in calories and contains no cholesterol. Rice milk, Sixwise reports, is mainly a source of carbohydrates, and should not be considered a nutritional replacement for cow's milk, though it is "a useful replacement for milk for taste and cooking purposes."

Hemp milk, which is made from the seeds of hemp plants but contains none of the psychoactive ingredients in marijuana, can be a good source of protein, calcium, omega fatty acids and other vitamins and minerals. Another good alternative is oat milk, which is high in fiber, free of cholesterol and lactose, and contains vitamin E, folic acid, and

other healthy elements and minerals.

CONTACTS: Dr. Joseph Mercola, www.mercola.com; Sixwise, www.sixwise.com.


Dear EarthTalk: I've read that household cleaners contain cancer-causing toxic ingredients. What should I do, then, to keep my house clean but also safe for my kids? -- Christine Stewart, via e-mail

While much of the research is mixed or inconclusive, a variety of human and animal studies have linked chemicals common in household cleaning products with a wide range of health risks.

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