

Why is dairy milk recommended for toddlers and young kids?

Milk is an important source of many nutrients that young children need for healthy growth and development like protein, fat, calcium, vitamin D, vitamin A, vitamin B12, potassium, phosphorous, riboflavin, and niacin. Importantly, milk is a good source of several key nutrients of concern that kids generally aren't getting enough of: potassium, calcium, and vitamin D. Dairy milk is often recommended as part of a healthy dietary pattern in the U.S. because it is an easy, naturally occurring, and affordable way to get these nutrients. While milk is not the only source of these nutrients, the transition from formula or breastmilk to milk is an easy one for many toddlers as milk is already a big part of most diets in the U.S.

What should healthcare providers recommend in place of dairy milk?

The recommendation will depend on why a child is avoiding dairy milk. Choose a scenario below to determine the steps for choosing a nutritionally appropriate alternative.

Child doesn't like the taste of milk	Lactose Intolerant	Dairy allergy	Vegan	Cultural/religious reason
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The child can have a nutritionally adequate diet without drinking milk if they are still consuming other dairy products in their diet ▶ Focus on recommending consumption of other dairy products like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yogurt (unflavored) • Cheese • Cottage cheese • Smoothie made with milk and/or yogurt ▶ Recommend replacing drinking milk with water to meet the child's daily fluid needs (do not recommend flavored milk or other sugary drinks in place of milk) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Recommend a lactose-free milk ▶ Lactose-free milk contains the same key nutrients and is still an excellent source of protein, calcium, vitamins and minerals ▶ Lactose-free versions of other dairy products are also available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Start with recommending unflavored and unsweetened fortified soy milk, pea protein milks, or a soy-pea blend as these are the most nutritionally similar to cow's milk ▶ If a child cannot tolerate soy or pea protein beverages – explore other unflavored and unsweetened plant-based milk options ▶ Which option to choose is going to depend on the rest of the child's diet, and where there might be nutrient short-falls. A Registered Dietitian should assess the child's full diet to ensure nutrient needs are met. ▶ To determine the next best option for your patient, we recommend using the nutrient table below 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Start with recommending unflavored and unsweetened fortified soy milk, pea protein milks, or a soy-pea blend as these are the most nutritionally similar to cow's milk ▶ If a child cannot tolerate soy or pea protein beverages – explore other unflavored and unsweetened plant-based milk options ▶ Which option to choose is going to depend on the rest of the child's diet, and where there might be nutrient short-falls. A Registered Dietitian should assess the child's full diet to ensure nutrient needs are met. ▶ To determine the next best option for your patient, we recommend using the nutrient table below ▶ Consider supplementing with Vitamin B12 as most children following a vegan diet will be deficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Start with recommending unflavored and unsweetened fortified soy milk, pea protein milks, or a soy-pea blend as these are the most nutritionally similar to cow's milk ▶ If a child cannot tolerate soy or pea protein beverages – explore other unflavored and unsweetened plant-based milk options ▶ Which option to choose is going to depend on the rest of the child's diet, and where there might be nutrient short-falls. A Registered Dietitian should assess the child's full diet to ensure nutrient needs are met. ▶ To determine the next best option for your patient, we recommend using the nutrient table below ▶ It is also important to explore any other dietary restrictions relevant for the family's culture, and/or religion as this may also have an impact on the recommended alternatives



What you need to know to select the best plant milk for young children:

Plant milks are nutritionally different from dairy milk, but the best options for young children will have nutritional profiles similar to cow's milk.

What are the best plant milks for toddlers and children?

- ▶ Fortified Soy Milk¹
- ▶ Pea Milk
- ▶ Soy-Pea Milk Blends

These options have similar protein, fat, calcium, and vitamin D levels as whole dairy milk.

Check out this list of plant milks and how they rank from best (green) to worst (red) when it comes to young children's nutritional needs.

Plant Milk Nutrition (unflavored, unsweetened varieties)²

	Cow's milk (whole)	Soy	Pea	Oat	Hazelnut	Hemp	Coconut	Cashew	Almond	Flax	Rice
Calories	152	80	80	90	90	60	40	25	30	25	70
Protein (g)	8	7	8	2	2	3	0	<1	1	0	0
Fat (g)	8	4	4.5	1.5	9	4.5	4	2	3	2.5	2.5
Added sugar (g)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Calcium (mg)	306	300	440	350	24	257	460	450	450	280	240
Vitamin D (mcg)	2.4	3	6	4	0	2	2	2.5	2.5	2.3	5
Potassium (mg)	374	350	405	400	105	100	310	0	170	0	10
Vitamin B12 (mcg)	1.34	3	2.5	0.2	—	—	0.9	—	—	1.4	0.6



No plant-based milk is a perfect substitute for the nutrients available in dairy milk. So, health care providers will have to work with children and families to ensure the child's diet provides adequate amounts of the key nutrients typically found in cow's milk that growing bodies need, such as protein, calcium, and vitamin D.

1. Among plant-based milk alternatives, only fortified soy beverage is currently considered a dairy equivalent according to the 2020 – 2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

2. Nutrition information is all for unsweetened, unflavored varieties. Specific products include: Soy - Silk Organic Unsweet, Pea - Ripple Unsweetened Original, Oat - Planet Oat Original, Hazelnut - Elmhurst Unsweetened, Hemp - Pacific Foods Unsweetened Original, Coconut - Silk Unsweet, Cashew - Silk Unsweet, Almond - Silk Unsweet Original, Flax - Good Karma Unsweetened, Rice - Rice Dream Enriched Unsweetened.

Key nutrients to look for when selecting a plant milk for young children:

WHAT	LOOK FOR	WHY
Protein	Select a milk alternative with 7-8 grams of protein when possible.	Toddlers and young kids need protein for growth and development. Children who eat a vegan diet may struggle to get enough protein in their diets.
Fat	Select full fat varieties for toddlers. "Reduced" or "low-fat" varieties are okay for kids, ages 3+.	Toddlers and young kids need fat for brain development. Fat is also important for helping your body absorb fat-soluble vitamins – A, E, D, K.
Added Sugar	Choose only unflavored, unsweetened varieties. Look for 0g added sugar on the nutrition facts label.	Infants and young children do not need any added sugar in their diet.
Calcium	Choose milk alternatives fortified with calcium carbonate. This type of calcium is more easily absorbed by our bodies.	Calcium is important for bone and teeth strength, and it is needed for your heart, muscles, and nerves to function properly. Because kids are constantly growing, calcium is especially important. 1-3 year olds need about 700 mg of calcium per day, while 4-8 year olds need about 1,000 mg.
Vitamin D	Choose milk alternatives fortified with vitamin D.	Vitamin D is important for overall health, and it's also necessary for calcium to be absorbed into bones. Toddlers and young children need 15 mcg of vitamin D per day.
Potassium	Look for plant milks with similar levels of potassium as cow's milk (~300-350mg).	Potassium is a key mineral needed by your body to function properly. Potassium helps nerves and muscles communicate, helps move nutrients into cells and waste out, and is important for healthy growth. Most people do not get enough potassium.
Vitamin B12	Choose milk alternatives fortified with B12.	Vitamin B12 is important for red blood cell formation and brain function. Animal products naturally contain B12, so children who eat a vegan diet are at high risk for B12 deficiency.

Some additional resources:

- ▶ [Healthy Eating Research: Dairy Milk vs. Plant Milks for Toddlers & Young Kids – a guide for caregivers](#)
- ▶ [Element Nutrition: Milk vs. milk alternatives for toddlers & kids](#)
- ▶ [The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Dairy Alternatives for Kids Who Won't—or Can't—Drink Milk](#)
- ▶ [Medical News Today: Plant-based milk alternatives-Which one meets your dietary needs better?](#)