

A Twisted History of Milk

According to evolutionary history and fossil records, modern humans have been around for the past 200,000 years. However, the practice of drinking cows' milk only dates back to the past 8,000 to 10,000 years. What this tells us is that consuming the milk of another species isn't instinctual. Our bodies did not evolve consuming it and as a result, our bodies don't naturally "crave" it. This explains why the vast majority of humans, more than 70%, lose the ability to break down lactose in their teen years.

Relative to human existence, the history of milk is considerably short. It may have helped some humans survive a few thousands of years ago, but power, corruption, greed and mass manipulation all play a role in the evolution of milk in our modern-day society. Thanks to the bizarre thinking of early humans who first started consuming it, most of us are consuming large quantities of a substance not meant for human consumption. It's time to leave cows' milk to those for whom it was evolutionarily developed, the baby cows.

Dairies Dramatic Rise.

A number of factors led to humans consuming more dairy.

First, there was the mutation which developed about 7000 years ago in eastern Europe and northern Africa resulting in the persistence of the enzyme lactase, which breaks down the main sugar in dairy, lactose. Prior to this, all humans stopped producing this enzyme past the toddler stage. We didn't need it anymore, since we no longer needed mother's milk.

Second was the domestication of dairy cows, leading to slowly, and then massively enlarging herds. Today, livestock accounts for more biomass than all humans on Earth; more than 50% greater than humans. And livestock accounts for much more than all wildlife. Wild mammals and birds collectively account for only 0.38%. Livestock outweigh wild mammals and birds by 10x.

Then came the invention of cheesemaking. In 1900, Americans barely ate a pound of cheese a year. Today, the average is over 35 pounds!

A huge leap forward in dairy consumption occurred when pasteurization developed. This ended the millions of people who died from milk-borne illnesses prior to the invention of pasteurization. In fact, 25% of all food-borne illnesses in the US were attributed to cows' milk prior to the early 1900's.

And then came the invention of the glass milk bottle along with refrigeration, allowing milk to be transported farther and not spoiling as quickly.

Then in 1922 there came the seminal passing of the Capper-Volstead Act. This bill gave agricultural industries permission to act together, form organizations, and market their product, dairy. They organized.

While the industry was very much reliant on small farms back in the day, this bill paved the way for the enormous dairy conglomerates and the massive milk marketing campaigns of today. Without it, the American people would have never known the phrase "Got Milk?" or "Milk. It Does A Body Good".

The Popularization of Skim Milk.

Prior to the 1930's, most of the skim milk was literally sent downriver. Families who drank milk only had the option of drinking whole milk. Skim milk still existed, but as a byproduct of the butter-making process. This "waste" was commonly disposed of by dumping it into rivers throughout the 1920's until the government was forced to put a stop to it due to the horrific odor of spoiled milk that permeated the surrounding areas. It wasn't until the 1950's that skim milk received some commercial attention, though this was in the form of a dry, powdered, "just add water!" mix.

By the way, another example of a dairy “waste” product being turned into a profitable product is whey protein. Whey is the second most common protein in dairy, after casein, and is a by-product of the cheese making process. It was initially also thrown away. In the 1930’s, a scientist isolated it as a protein source but it remained a “medical” treatment until the 1990’s when its use in protein shakes, primarily for bodybuilding, became popular. Now, it is an additive in many products, to boost protein content as well as a thickener and flavor enhancer.

As awful as instant milk powder sounds today, we can’t blame our grandparents. Instant was all the rage back then. The industry also had plenty of skim milk to get rid of, as much of it was left over from WWII when dry milk powder was used to feed troops in the field and as relief food. To reduce this surplus, the industry employed skilled marketers to position skim milk as a “weight-loss” food. Milk dealers received backing from physicians to promote skim milk as a health food, and by the 1950’s, skim milk had transformed from a waste byproduct to a trendy weight loss beverage mostly consumed by affluent society. In reality, farmers just needed a way to get rid of the skim milk they had made during the war effort. Clearly, profit also played a significant role.

Surplus and Subsidies.

During WWI, the US government started sending canned and powdered milk to soldiers overseas, and dairy farmers responded by ramping up production. They invested in the latest equipment and even abandoned other forms of farming to dedicate their work to the war effort. Although the war ended, milk production did not, creating a surplus and very low milk prices as a result. Throughout the 1930’s, dairy farmers staged several strikes and unionized to demand a fair price for their milk.

To appease dairy farmers, the government created federal programs to artificially increase demand. The first of these programs included the 1940 Federal Milk Program for Schools and federally subsidized milk advertising under the Works Progress Administration. In 1946, President Truman passed the National School Lunch Act, which mandated each lunch include between 1½ to 2 pints of whole milk per student. In essence, since adults weren’t buying milk, the government solution was to force it onto their children. To this day, children who participate in the National School Lunch Program, an essential program which offers free or low-cost lunches to students of low-income families, are required to take a carton of dairy milk. Students actually need a doctor’s note if they want a non-dairy beverage like soy, almond or oat.

Despite the government-funded campaigns to convince nearly every demographic of American to drink more milk, the surplus continued throughout the decades. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter allowed \$2 billion (nearly \$10 billion in 2022 dollars) federal dollars to be funneled into the dairy industry over the course of four years. In response, dairy farmers ramped up production even more to take advantage of this government subsidy, which resulted in an even greater surplus. This soon-to-rot milk was made into “government cheese,” and held in vast underground storage units across 35 states. Not only was this a waste, but it was also very expensive. In 1982, a New York Times reporter stated that the federal government would spend \$40 to \$50 million transporting this surplus dairy, and another \$40 to \$50 million to store it. By this time, the government was spending \$2 billion in taxpayer dollars annually to support the dairy subsidy. The solution was twofold: give the nearly moldy cheese to low-income citizens, and funnel money into heavy dairy marketing.

Modern Marketing (and Extra Cheesy Pizzas)

In 1983, prompted by the dairy industry, Congress created the National Dairy Promotion and Research Board whose sole purpose was to promote dairy products by way of marketing and “nutritional education.” This was also called the Dairy Checkoff Program. It is an industry-funded federal program that has a profound impact on what Americans choose to consume. To fund this effort, dairy farmers agreed to pay a small fee based on the weight of the milk they sold. This program is responsible for some of America’s most crave-able (and least healthy) food products including the Pizza Hut’s Stuffed Crust Pizza and Taco Bell’s Quesalupa and succeeding Quesarito. The Board has worked with dozens of companies to promote dairy-heavy menu items. The result is 40% more cheese on Domino’s pizzas, more milky drinks at Starbucks, and larger cheese slices on Egg McMuffins. In addition to these corporate collaborations, the checkoff program is also responsible for the pro-dairy slogans like “Got Milk?” and “Milk. It does a body good”.

The illusion that chocolate milk is a recovery food in athletics is also a belief that was instigated by industry. The studies that demonstrated a positive correlation between athletic performance and chocolate milk were funded by the dairy industry and specifically designed to favor dairy. Scientists ensured the industry's desired result by comparing chocolate milk to water or a nutritionally deficient sports drink. Most readers don't read beyond the headlines, let alone analyze scientific studies. People see the professional athlete sporting a milk mustache when they flip the page in a magazine, or they scroll through the headlines and see that a new study confirms the benefits of chocolate milk in teen athletes, and they're reminded to add milk to their grocery list. Milk has become so ingrained in our culture that we cannot see past the smoke and mirrors to what milk really is, which is a century-long problem the government cannot spend enough money to get rid of, no matter how much cheese Pizza Hut stuffs into its crust.

Moving Forward.

Looking back at the history of milk, we can see that milk isn't a healthy food. It's just a very heavily funded and well-marketed product. If that ancestor who first started to try cow's milk had decided to suckle a dog instead, we all might be drinking dog milk; or if there was a mass surplus of soda in the early 1900's and the soda producers yelled loudly enough, cola could have been today's pre-workout beverage. We believe milk is healthy because that is what we have been told, and until now, there has been little to question this.