

# Dairy and the heart



This position statement summarises the key findings and recommendations from the Heart Foundation's evidence paper, 'Dairy and the Heart'. The purpose of the evidence paper is to look at the relationship between dairy (milk, cheese and yoghurt) and heart disease in order to assess if the Heart Foundation recommendation to choose reduced-fat dairy products remains valid.

## KEY FINDINGS

Evidence suggests total dairy (including all full-fat or reduced-fat milk, cheese and yoghurt) does not appear to be associated with an adverse effect on cardiovascular disease (CVD) or coronary heart disease (CHD), and some studies suggest a beneficial effect. However, data on total dairy does not tell us whether reducing dairy fat is better or worse for heart health.

Similarly, reduced-fat dairy has been linked with reduced risk for some, but not all, cardiovascular risk factors:

- Low-fat dairy may be associated with reduced risk of hypertension over the longer term.
- For people aiming to reduce their LDL cholesterol levels, reducing dairy fat may help make a small improvement.
- Low-fat dairy or yoghurt may be associated with a small reduction in risk of type 2 diabetes.
- The evidence does not suggest a beneficial effect of dairy on insulin sensitivity or inflammation, nor does it suggest any benefit of reduced-fat dairy over full-fat for weight loss.

Despite the volume of research conducted, there is inconsistency in study findings. High-quality, adequately powered, long-term and non-industry funded randomised controlled trial comparing full-fat and reduced-fat dairy products are needed before recommendations can be made with more confidence.

As it stands, the evidence overall suggests dairy products can be included in a heart-healthy eating pattern and choosing reduced-fat dairy over full-fat dairy reduces risk for some, but not all, cardiovascular risk factors. Substitution modelling suggests that eating less dairy fat, in favour of unsaturated sources of fat or healthier foods, is associated with reduced risk of heart disease.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **For the general population and those at risk of heart disease**

Dairy is a nutritious food that can be part of a heart-healthy dietary pattern. Milk, yoghurt and cheese contain protein, and vitamins and minerals such as riboflavin, vitamins A and B12, calcium, zinc, and phosphorous.

Based on current evidence, the Heart Foundation recommends that New Zealanders continue to choose mostly reduced-fat dairy options as part of a heart-healthy eating pattern.

There is ample evidence that sources of fat that are part of a heart healthy eating pattern include nuts, oily fish, avocado, olives and most plant oils. These and other plant fats should be the predominant sources of fat in the diet. They are best consumed within a dietary pattern that emphasises vegetables and fruit, with unrefined grains, legumes, and, if eaten, non-processed lean meats, poultry and oily fish, and reduced fat yoghurt, milk and cheese.