

Got Milk? You've Got Problems

By Karen Dawn
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Note - Karen Dawn runs the animal advocacy media watch DawnWatch.com and is a contributor to "In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave" (Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

Dairy cows have overtaken automobiles as the No. 1 air polluter in parts of California, according to a Los Angeles Times article. A New York Times editorial discussed "the eye-stinging, nose-burning smell of cattle congestion in rural California," acknowledging that something had to be done. What nobody wants to say, in this land of milk and cookies, is that we shouldn't be drinking cow's milk.

In the last edition of his "Baby and Child Care" bible, Dr. Benjamin Spock made it clear that cow's milk is for baby cows, not for human children. He wrote that it was "too rich in the saturated fats that cause artery blockages" and that it "slows down iron absorption." He suggested that it may cause ear and/or respiratory problems, and may be linked to childhood onset diabetes. He stressed that infants should drink only human breast milk and older children should try soy and rice milk products.

But the dairy industry would rather you didn't know that. As it spends millions of dollars telling us that milk consumption will help us lose weight, it would rather we didn't see a study published in the June issue of the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine. The study found that children who drink more than three servings of milk daily are prone to becoming overweight, even if it is low-fat milk. Neither does the industry advertise the Harvard School of Public Health finding that 15% of whites, 70% of African Americans and 90% of Asians are lactose intolerant.

The dairy industry prefers to scare us with tales of brittle bones, hoping we don't notice studies showing that people in Asia, who consume almost no dairy products, have a significantly lower rate of hip fractures than people in "got milk?" America. Consistent with those results is Harvard University's 1997 Nurses Health Study, which followed 78,000 women over a 12-year period and found that those who consumed the most dairy foods broke the most bones.

And a study published just this month in the International Journal of Cancer found a 13% increase in ovarian cancer risk in women who increased their lactose intake in amounts equivalent to one glass of milk per day.

Men don't need milk either. A Harvard study published in 1998 linked high calcium consumption to prostate cancer, and in this week's news, we learned that Dean Ornish's low-fat, vegan diet (no dairy) may block the progression of that disease. While touting its products as a fundamental part of a healthy diet, the dairy industry won't rush to tell us that Scott Jurek, who just won the Western States 100-mile run -- for the seventh time in a row -- is vegan.

Now, we learn that the dairy industry may also be

harming our children by polluting the air. The Times article quoted an attorney for the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, who said that in Fresno, in the center of the nation's dairy industry, one in six children carries an inhaler to school.

Instead of protecting us, the government aligns itself with the dairy lobby. The California Milk Advisory Board, a government agency, playfully took advantage of society's increasing concern for animal welfare with its phenomenally successful "happy cows" campaign, which shows extended bovine families grazing in meadows.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals sued the board for false advertising, arguing that most California dairy cows live miserable lives on overcrowded dirt lots. They are artificially inseminated annually, because they don't produce milk without pregnancies, and are pumped full of hormones so that they will give 10 times as much milk as they would naturally. Their calves are carted off to veal crates. Then at about age 5, the "happy" cows are turned into hamburgers. PETA's suit failed -- on the grounds that government bodies are exempt from fair advertising laws. Government is free to say whatever it wants about the conditions in which cows live, or about the "health benefits" of milk.

Unfortunately, the government is unlikely to start running ads suggesting we follow Asia's lead and switch to tofu, or even kale, though both have more calcium per cup than cow's milk. But for your health, the environment, the animals, and for those kids in Fresno carrying inhalers, why not change your next Starbucks low-fat latte order to soy?

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