

Milk is an excellent choice as a drink for children from 12 months of age. It is a good source of protein, calcium and other nutrients. More and more families/carers are choosing milk alternatives such as almond or rice milk for their children but is this the best choice nutritionally for children?

Cow's milk

Pasteurised full cream milk may be introduced to a child's diet as a drink around 12 months of age and be continued throughout the second year of life. The calcium found in cow's milk is easily absorbed and more bio-available than calcium in other sources. Cow's milk contains Vitamin A and B₁₂ and some other B vitamins, all of which are essential in sustaining growth and development.

Low fat and reduced fat milks (milk with 2-2.5% fat) are not recommended for children under two years of age as fats found in cow's milk promote child development. From two years of age, the recommended choice is reduced fat milk. Skim milk (milk with less than 0.15% milk fat) is also not recommended for children.



Alternative milks

Soy (except fortified soy products) and other nutritionally incomplete alternate milks or milk substitutes (e.g. goat's milk, sheep's milk, coconut milk, and almond milk) are inappropriate alternative milks for children.

Plant based milks (e.g. soy, rice, oat) should only be offered if there are specific medical, cultural or religious reasons as they are not an appropriate source of nutrition for infants. These 'milks' are nutritionally different to cow's milk and many do not offer the essential nutrients important for a growing child.

Fortified soy drink or calcium-enriched rice and oat beverages can be used after 12 months under health professional supervision as long as:

- a full fat variety is used
- they are fortified with calcium (at least 100mg of calcium per 100ml)
- alternative sources of protein and vitamin B₁₂ are included in the diet as alternative milks contain less protein than cow's milk or soy milk.

Toddler milks

Toddler milks and special and/or supplementary foods for toddlers or children are usually not required for children who are eating a healthy, balanced diet.

Verdict

Cow's milk is an excellent source of protein, calcium and other nutrients. It is the best choice for a growing child unless there are specific medical, cultural or religious reasons. If choosing an alternative milk, it is best to speak with a health professional to ensure that the child is meeting all of their nutrient requirements, such as for protein, calcium and vitamin B₁₂.

Tips:

- Try and give milk in a cup (cups can be used for water from around six months of age)
- After 12 months of age, children should drink a maximum of 500ml of cow's milk per day due to the high protein and low iron content. Drinking large amounts of milk can lead to reduced appetite at mealtimes, resulting in a reduced variety of foods being introduced and found acceptable.