

# MINDFUL ABOUT MILK

by KELLE WALSH

Drink wisely with plant-based alternatives to dairy that are good for you, and good for the planet.

Going dairy-free—for health or other reasons—used to require drastically altering your diet. Now, thanks to the explosion of the plant-based “milk” market, it’s never been easier. Coffee, frozen desserts, creamed soups, you name it: If a food or beverage calls for dairy, there’s now a reasonable substitute. While the FDA’s currently weighing whether these products should be allowed to call themselves “milk” (the EU doesn’t allow it), the plant-based beverage boom follows growing interest in alternatives to dairy.

A staggering 65% of the human population have trouble digesting lactose (a sugar present in cow’s milk), according to the National Institutes of Health. The highest rates of lactose intolerance occur among those of East Asian descent, but it’s also common in those of West African, Arab, Jewish, Greek, and Italian descent. Only about 5% of people of Northern European descent are lactose intolerant—some genetic experts believe this is due to a long history of dependence on milk as an important food source.

Aside from the health concerns, many people steer clear of dairy due to environmental concerns about the impacts of industrial animal farming. Conventional animal agriculture has an outsized carbon footprint, puts a massive strain on local water supplies, and in some places, leads to the loss of important wetlands and forest.

## THE HEALTHIEST MILK?

Plant-based beverages aren’t necessarily a nutritional “swap” for dairy milk. While there have been conflicting studies about the health impacts of dairy, most nutritionists still recommend it as an excellent source of dietary calcium, a mineral essential for bone health, and also for other functions, including blood clotting, heartbeat regulation, and nerve function. As a whole food, cow’s milk also provides fat, complex carbohydrates, and protein, among other nutrients.

Plant-based milks are usually lower in calories and saturated fat, and nearly all are cholesterol-free, unlike dairy. But, with the exception of soy, pea, and hemp milks, most contain little to no protein. And while the idea of a beverage made from nuts or grains sounds healthy, most of the nutrients found in the plant are stripped out during processing and have to be added back in.

Nondairy beverages often contain a slew of additives that don’t add nutritional value, including thickeners and artificial coloring. Plus, the amount of sugar added to some nondairy beverages can rival that of soft drinks.

Ultimately the choice to use plant-based alternatives to milk, in part or in full, is a personal one based on a variety of factors. Being a mindful consumer means knowing your options.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelle Walsh is a former senior editor for *Mindful* and lives in Colorado.



## DO YOUR BODY GOOD

No matter which kind of plant-based milk alternative you try, here are some good guidelines to keep in mind.

- Choose certified organic products.
- Choose products without added sweeteners (or minimal amounts), flavorings, oil, or carrageenan.
- Choose products that disclose the amount of plant source in the beverage.





# CHOOSE THE RIGHT PLANT-BASED BEVERAGE FOR YOU

## OAT

### PROS

High in fiber and protein, mild flavor, not a land- or water-intensive crop

### CONS

Unless organic, can contain trace herbicides and fungicides



## RICE

### PROS

Safe for people with allergies, neutral flavor

### CONS

Little nutritional value, high arsenic levels, water-intensive crop with high methane emissions



## SOY

### PROS

Closest to dairy, with a healthy fat and cholesterol profile

### CONS

Common allergen, has hormone-disrupting properties, often made with GMO soy



## HEMP

### PROS

Complete protein, healthy fat profile, low-impact crop with a high CO<sub>2</sub> absorption rate

### CONS

May contain thickeners and sugar



## FLAX

### PROS

High in fiber, earthy flavor

### CONS

May be heavily sweetened



## COCONUT

### PROS

High in healthy fat, abundant crop

### CONS

Strong taste, high carbon footprint\*



## ALMOND

### PROS

Sweet taste, low in calories, good in smoothies

### CONS

Common allergen, water-intensive crop, high carbon footprint\*



\*compared to other dairy-free options