

Dairy Milk vs. Plant Milks

for Toddlers & Young Kids

Why is dairy milk recommended for toddlers and young kids?

Milk is an important source of many nutrients that young children need for healthy growth and development like protein, fat, calcium, vitamin D, and potassium. Dairy milk is recommended because it is an easy, naturally occurring, and affordable way to get these nutrients and more. While milk is not the only source of these nutrients, the transition from formula or breastmilk to milk is an easy one for many toddlers as milk is already a big part of most diets in the U.S.

What do I need to know about plant milks for young kids?

1. Plant milk – whether it's made from nuts, oats, rice, or another plant food – is not nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk.
2. These beverages should never be used in the first year of life to replace human milk or infant formula.
3. Not all plant milks are the same, which means that not all of them are appropriate for the nutritional needs of young, growing children.

When are plant milks appropriate for young kids?

If your child is lactose intolerant or allergic to dairy milk, or if your family has chosen not to eat animal products, you might be looking for a plant milk alternative.



If none of these apply to you, then stick to cow's milk – it's naturally rich in the nutrients your child needs for healthy growth and development.



Plant milks are nutritionally different from dairy milk, but the best options for young children will have nutritional profiles similar to cow's milk.

What are the best plant milks for toddlers and children?

- Soy Milk
- Pea Milk
- Soy-Pea Milk Blends

These options have similar protein, fat, calcium, and vitamin D levels as whole dairy milk.

Among plant-based milk alternatives, **only fortified soy beverage** is currently considered a dairy equivalent.

There are now more varieties of plant milks than ever and the nutrients can vary widely by brand. Some plant milks have added nutrients and many also contain added sugars, which are not recommended for young children. Check out this list of plant milks and how they rank from best (green) to worst (red) when it comes to young children's nutritional needs.

Plant Milk Nutrition (unflavored, unsweetened varieties)¹

	Cow's milk (whole)	Soy	Pea	Oat	Hazelnut	Hemp	Coconut	Cashew	Almond	Flax	Rice
Calories	152	80	80	90	90	60	40	25	30	25	70
Protein (g)	8	7	8	2	2	3	0	<1	1	0	0
Fat (g)	8	4	4.5	1.5	9	4.5	4	2	3	2.5	2.5
Added sugar (g)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Calcium (mg)	306	300	440	350	24	257	460	450	450	280	240
Vitamin D (mcg)	2.4	3	6	4	0	2	2	2.5	2.5	2.3	5
Potassium (mg)	374	350	405	400	105	100	310	0	170	0	10
Vitamin B12 (mcg)	1.34	3	2.5	0.2	—	—	0.9	—	—	1.4	0.6
		Plant Milk Price²									
	\$	\$\$	\$\$\$	\$\$	\$\$\$\$	\$\$\$\$	\$\$	\$\$	\$\$	\$\$	\$\$
\$/gallon	3.62	5.98	12.24	9.82	23.16	21.16	7.74	7.74	6.54	7.98	7.38
\$/8 fl oz serving	0.22	0.37	0.77	0.61	1.44	1.32	0.48	0.48	0.40	0.50	0.46


1. Nutrition information is all for unsweetened, unflavored varieties. Specific products include: Soy - Silk Organic Unsweet, Pea - Ripple Unsweetened Original, Oat - Planet Oat Original, Hazelnut - Elmhurst Unsweetened, Hemp - Pacific Foods Unsweetened Original, Coconut - Silk Unsweet, Cashew - Silk Unsweet, Almond - Silk Unsweet Original, Flax - Good Karma Unsweetened, Rice - Rice Dream Enriched Unsweetened.

2. Prices are taken from various U.S. retailers, updated September 2022.

Did you Know?
Cup for cup, plant milks are more expensive than cow's milk.

This chart explains the key nutrients in cow’s milk that young children need for growth and development. We used this information to inform our recommendations on the best plant milk substitutes for toddlers and young kids.

WHAT	LOOK FOR	WHY
Protein	Select a milk alternative with 7-8 grams of protein when possible.	Toddlers and young kids need protein for growth and development. Children who eat a vegan diet may struggle to get enough protein in their diets.
Fat	Select full fat varieties for toddlers. “Reduced” or “low-fat” varieties are okay for kids, ages 3+.	Toddlers and young kids need fat for brain development. Fat is also important for helping your body absorb fat-soluble vitamins – A, E, D, K.
Added Sugar	Choose only unflavored, unsweetened varieties. Look for 0g added sugar on the nutrition facts label.	Infants and young children do not need any added sugar in their diet.
Calcium	Choose milk alternatives fortified with calcium carbonate. This type of calcium is more easily absorbed by our bodies.	Calcium is important for bone and teeth strength, and it is needed for your heart, muscles, and nerves to function properly. Because kids are constantly growing, calcium is especially important. 1-3 year olds need about 700 mg of calcium per day, while 4-8 year olds need about 1,000 mg.
Vitamin D	Choose milk alternatives fortified with vitamin D.	Vitamin D is important for overall health, and it’s also necessary for calcium to be absorbed into bones. Toddlers and young children need 15 mcg of vitamin D per day.
Potassium	Look for plant milks with similar levels of potassium as cow’s milk (~300-350mg).	Potassium is a key mineral needed by your body to function properly. Potassium helps nerves and muscles communicate, helps move nutrients into cells and waste out, and is important for healthy growth. Most people do not get enough potassium.
Vitamin B12	Choose milk alternatives fortified with B12.	Vitamin B12 is important for red blood cell formation and brain function. Animal products naturally contain B12, so children who eat a vegan diet are at high risk for B12 deficiency.

 Talk with your child’s pediatrician or a registered dietitian to make sure that your child’s diet provides the rest of the nutrients that growing bodies need and to learn more about other sources of key nutrients found in dairy milk.