College Women’s Perceptions of Dairy Foods: A Qualitative Study

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Research has indicated that college-age women are not consuming the recommended daily servings of dairy foods, and therefore, have inadequate calcium intakes as well. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 29 college women to explore their perceptions, opinions, thoughts, and feelings about dairy foods. Single, non-Hispanic white females, aged 19-22, enrolled in state-funded colleges and universities in Virginia were recruited for the study. Discussion questions addressed preferences for dairy foods, advantages and disadvantages of dairy foods, factors that influence dairy consumption, and ideas for product improvements. Focus group discussions were audio taped, transcribed by the researcher, then checked for accuracy by a Virginia Tech undergraduate student. Major themes and subthemes were identified, and results were reported in the following theme categories: 1) health and nutrition perceptions of dairy foods, 2) external influences on dairy food consumption, 3) characteristics of dairy products, and 4) ideas for product improvements.

Women in this study perceived the high calcium content of dairy foods to be a health benefit. Women thought calcium was important for the prevention of osteoporosis; however, most women did not seem to perceive osteoporosis as an immediate health concern. A predominant theme throughout all focus groups was that college women thought many dairy foods were high in fat. Use of calcium supplements as well as other vitamin/mineral supplements to meet nutrient requirements was common among this sample of college women. Other factors that influenced women’s dairy food choices included family influences (especially mothers), college lifestyle, and media sources. Specifically, mothers encouraged women to drink milk during childhood and to use supplements. Women’s busy lifestyles at college influenced them to choose convenient
dairy foods. Women’s concern with body weight and image played a role in their lower fat dairy food choices.

Sensory characteristics of dairy foods, particularly taste, were important to the college women’s dairy food choices. Women wanted convenient and “easily accessible” dairy foods, and their ideas for product improvements included smaller package sizes, easier opening of packages, and improved availability of low fat dairy options in restaurants and dining halls. Nutrition educators should strive to emphasize the importance of adequate dairy food consumption to college women now to prevent osteoporosis in the future. Continued promotion of low fat dairy choices is important to help ensure that women receive adequate intake of calcium and other important nutrients.