

# Trimester 3 Executive Summary

## Five Headlines. One Year.

- 01 Agriculture Secretary's Endorsement. New Dairy Education Series on the Way.
- 02 Set to Train 400 Professionals. 2,576 Were Reached.
- 03 MDC Engages Students. Explore Dairy Deepens Learning.
- 04 1,609+ Students and Community Members Reached Through Let's Eat Healthy Grants.
- 05 Whole Milk Moves Through California. Dairy Council of CA Put It on the Agenda.



*This report summarizes Trimester 3 activities and preliminary outcomes for FY 2025-26 (February – May 31<sup>st</sup> 2026), presented against annual Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) goals across Education, Advocacy, Collaboration and Thriving Organization strategies. Final year-end results will be reported in November 2026.*

# AT A GLANCE

A snapshot of Dairy Council of California’s reach and impact across FY 2025–2026 is drawn from Trimester 1 (T1), Trimester 2 (T2) and preliminary Trimester 3 (T3) activity. Final year-end figures will be reported in November 2026.

Unless otherwise noted, highlights throughout this report reflect T3 activities. T1 and T2 items are labeled accordingly.

## Mobile Dairy Classroom (MDC)

**349,874**

Total reached this year, including in-person, virtual, Ag days and community events

**655K**

California State Fair visitors exposed to dairy messaging and education

**97%**

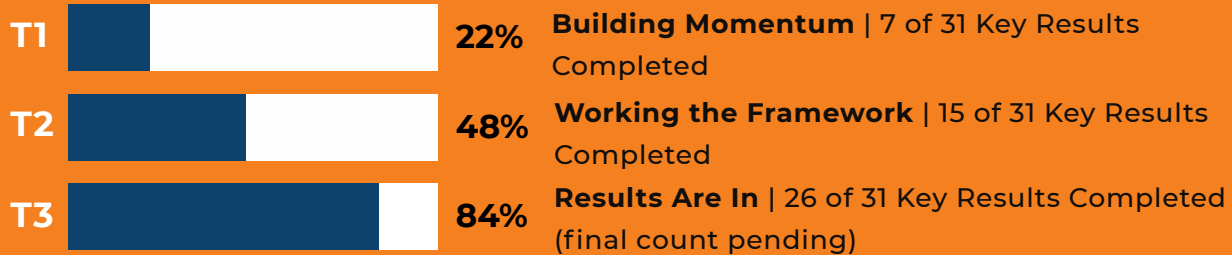
MDC instructor time delivering dairy education

**94%**

MDC satisfaction rating (consistent across all three trimesters)

## Objectives and Key Results (OKRs)

Dairy Council of California measures annual progress through Key Results (KRs) organized across four strategies. The progression below reflects cumulative goal completion from T1 through T3.



## Resources, Publications, Views

**355,552**

Nutrition resources ordered and downloaded statewide (print and digital within California)



Third-party Publications year total

**20**

3 new outlets

**▲ 150%**

of new publication goal

YouTube channel views


**674,840**

July 2025 - June 2026  
up year over year by

**248%\*** 

\* Note: For a direct year-over-year comparison, analytics were adjusted to cover the same number of days for both periods (July 1 through June 5). On this comparable basis, views increased by approximately 248%.

### Most ordered resources (excluding curriculum):



**Pregnancy Booklet**

**59,028**

Health Professionals



**Healthy Eating for Your Family Booklet**

**37,509**


Health Professionals



**MyPlate Builder Handout**

**29,979**

School Audience



**Boost Your Brain with Breakfast Handout**

**29,855**

School Audience

# AGRICULTURE SECRETARY'S ENDORSEMENT. NEW DAIRY EDUCATION SERIES ON THE WAY.



This trimester, Dairy Council of CA's work received an unsolicited state leader's endorsement and secured a new broadcast partnership that will bring bilingual dairy nutrition and farm-to-school education to Inland Empire families and beyond. Both reflect the strength of the work.

**4** endorsements secured, year total  
**200%**▲ of endorsement goal of 2

## Secretary Karen Ross, California Department of Food and Agriculture:

Ross cited Dairy Council of CA nutrition education and MDC's role in California schools—unprompted—at the CA Dairy Sustainability Summit in front of 450 industry leaders.

## Fresno-Madera Dental Society:

Dr. Abhi Thakkar's newsletter article, "Integrating Evidence-Based Nutrition Into Contemporary Dental Practice," called out Dairy Council of CA, the value of key dairy nutrients and the Trends publication.

## KVCR/San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools:

Inspired by the success of the Let's Eat Healthy Together broadcast series in Los Angeles, production of the new series, *The Great Food Quest*, will be completed in T3 and launch in October 2026. Spanish language is infused throughout the eight-episode series, directly serving the more than 50% of San Bernardino County students from Spanish-speaking households.



# SET TO TRAIN 400 PROFESSIONALS. 2,576 WERE REACHED.

Dairy Council of CA sought impact via school nutrition conferences, school business leaders, school districts and university lecture halls. Attending professionals implement nutrition policy, write school menus, counsel patients and train the next generation of health educators. Every session multiplies impact.

## ✓ CALIFORNIA SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION LEGISLATIVE ACTION CONFERENCE:

Dairy Council of CA facilitated a panel on children's health, the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans and whole milk opportunities for school nutrition and industry partners.

## ✓ CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BUSINESS OFFICIALS (CASBO) ANNUAL CONFERENCE:

**40** school business officials attended a session on whole milk in schools. Of those who completed a satisfaction survey, **100%** rated it positively. Irvine Unified School District announced it is expanding access to whole milk at all of its high schools.

## ✓ DUTCH DIETARY GUIDELINES IDF WEBINAR:

A webinar for International Dairy Federation members covered new Dutch dietary guidelines and implications for dairy foods and reached **50** international nutrition and policy professionals. Discussion included sustainability, plant-based shifts and dairy's continued role in healthy food guidance.

## ✓ LOS ANGELES DIETETIC INTERN CONSORTIUM:

**45** future registered dietitians learned about dairy sustainability. Attendee feedback: *"The speaker was engaging and made the information interesting. 10/10!"*



## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

**33** workshops delivered, year total (12 in T3)

**2,576** professionals reached, year total

## PODIUMS IN CONFERENCES:

**23** podium presentations, year total (7 in T3)

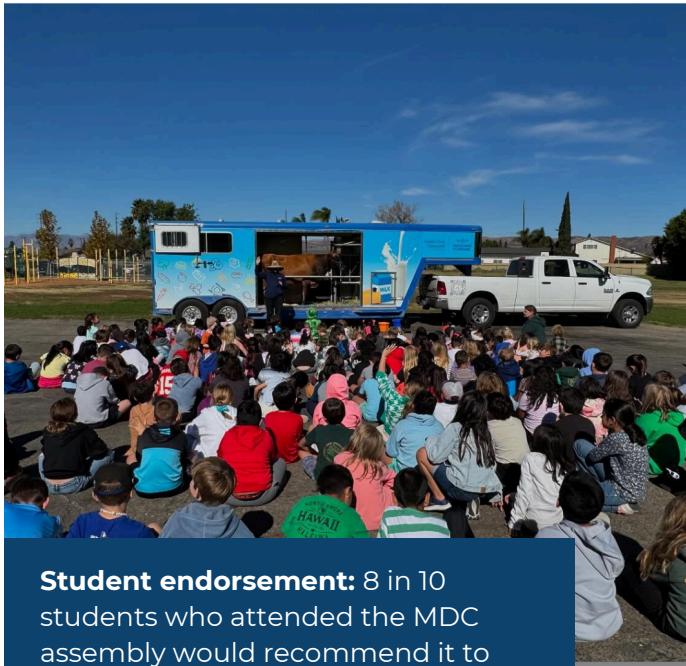
**1,639** audience members reached, year total

"When Irvine introduced whole milk at a high school as a pilot, they were amazed at the increase in consumption. Irvine will be implementing whole milk in all their high schools."

— CASBO Annual Conference attendee · Sacramento, 2026

# MDC ENGAGES STUDENTS. EXPLORE DAIRY DEEPENS LEARNING.

Explore Dairy, a classroom-based dairy nutrition curriculum designed for upper elementary students, was paired with the Mobile Dairy Classroom assembly. This trimester, West Coast University independently evaluated what happens when the two are used together. The finding matters: MDC was highly effective and memorable. Adding Explore Dairy moved the needle further. The paired program outperformed on every measure.



**Student endorsement:** 8 in 10 students who attended the MDC assembly would recommend it to other schools — consistent across girls and boys, 4th and 5th graders.

## MDC ALONE:

The MDC assembly produced strong results on its own. Students engaged with the experience and left with meaningful exposure to dairy farming and nutrition. The most remembered concept was the 4-compartment stomach and digestion (~100 students cited it).

## EXPLORE DAIRY + MDC:

Students engaged in the combined programs showed greater gains in dairy nutrition knowledge, attitudes and food liking compared to MDC-only and control groups.

## WHY IT MATTERS:

Dairy Council of CA now has independent research findings that the pairing works—an evidence base for grant applications, board investment and future scale decisions.

# 53.8

Explore Dairy curriculum Net Promoter Score, measuring how likely participants are to recommend a program to a colleague. Scores above 50 are considered excellent. Goal was 50—exceeded



# 567

students surveyed before and after the program

## PARTICIPATION

**33 teachers across  
13 schools**

## TEACHER BUY-IN:

# 96%

would use the program again.

88% gave recommendation scores of 8 or higher out of 10

100% reported gaining new knowledge and feeling more confident teaching dairy nutrition — and most came in with no prior DCC experience.

# 1,609+ STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS REACHED THROUGH LET'S EAT HEALTHY GRANTS

Let's Eat Healthy (LEH) grants funded community partners to bring dairy nutrition education directly to students. Partners invested alongside Dairy Council of CA with staff time, vendor partnerships and in-kind resources — collectively contributing over \$21K in-kind across the grant term. This trimester, programming spanned from Los Angeles classrooms to a working dairy farm in Siskiyou County.



## Pasture Raised Kids, Siskiyou County

*589+ students and  
community members:*

A dairy farm field trip at Hale Dairy connected students from four school sites to a working dairy farm, while Explore Dairy was implemented across seven sites, including childcare centers. A community dairy barn event featured hands-on cheese tasting, butter-making and local foods education. Pasture Raised Kids contributed \$20,400 in staff time and supplies.



## Arts in Action, Los Angeles County

*490 students*

Students explored milk's "superpowers" through a schoolwide scavenger hunt with tastings and parent-led games. Families took home milk carton activities to continue the learning. TK and 1st graders also toured the Centennial Farm milking barn, making a direct farm-to-classroom connection. \$321 in-kind was secured from vendors across the grant term.



## Hidden Valley Elementary, Sonoma County

*530 students, TK–  
6th grade*

For in class taste tests using LEH curriculum, with recipe kits sent home, the district contributed \$500 in-kind for food. An exit interview after the grant term showed more nutrition education at the school and the addition of a dairy menu item—positive indicators of the grant's reach beyond the classroom.



# WHOLE MILK MOVES THROUGH CALIFORNIA. DAIRY COUNCIL OF CA PUT IT ON THE AGENDA.

The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act and the Dietary Guidelines created a moment, and Dairy Council of CA was positioned to move quickly. In T3, advocacy work extended beyond professional development sessions into peer-reviewed publications, legislative panels and thought leadership, reaching professionals across every priority sector.



**6** thought leadership pieces published, year total

**120%** of 5-piece goal

## CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF PHYSICIAN ASSOCIATES

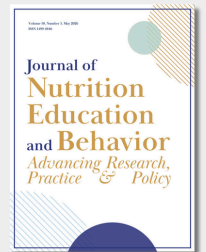
A co-authored article on lactose intolerance was published through *CAPA Quarterly*, reaching **3,600** physician associates who directly influence patient dairy recommendations.



**13,289** monthly viewers reached through editorial in peer-reviewed publication

## JOURNAL OF NUTRITION EDUCATION AND BEHAVIOR

Dairy Council of CA co-authored an editorial through the Nutrition Education for Children Division reaching nutrition education researchers, practitioners and public health policy professionals.



## A YEAR TAKING SHAPE

The five headlines in this report represent the strongest outcomes from T3, drawn from completed activities, independent evaluations and preliminary OKRs results. Final year-end totals across all 31 Key Results will be reported in November.

**Looking Ahead:** Dairy Council of CA enters June with a full calendar. The June Is Dairy Month campaign, Summer Meals programming, partner activations and several podium presentations are all underway.

There is more to come.







# Dairy Council of California Highlights Community Access, Nutrition and Women Dairy Farmer Leadership During National Dairy Month

Source: [Dairy Council of California](#)

---

SACRAMENTO, Calif., June 01, 2026 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- June marks National Dairy Month, and Dairy Council of California is spotlighting how dairy supports healthy communities across the state through a campaign focused on access, nutrition and leadership.

This year's effort centers on expanding access to nutritious foods, advancing science-based nutrition education and elevating leadership within California's dairy community.

"As we celebrate National Dairy Month, we're proud to highlight the many ways dairy supports the health of people and communities," said Amy DeLisio, a registered dietitian nutritionist and CEO of Dairy Council of California. "From helping families access nutritious foods during the summer to advancing nutrition education and recognizing women dairy farmer leadership, this work reflects dairy's role in everyday life."

With the start of summer, the campaign emphasizes community access, including raising awareness of summer meal programs that help ensure children continue to receive balanced meals while school is out. Activities include support for Lodi Unified School District's summer meal food distribution event on June 3, as well as a June 9

community event with Mother's Nutritional Center in Los Angeles, where families can participate in an educational experience and sample dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt.

The campaign also highlights science-based nutrition, including the role of milk and dairy foods in healthy eating patterns. Dairy Council of California is launching a Farm-to-You: Milk resource, which helps people understand how milk gets from farm to table and its role in delivering nutrition in schools and communities.

Explore the Farm-to-You: Milk resource: [DairyCouncilofCA.org/F2YMilk](https://DairyCouncilofCA.org/F2YMilk).

National Dairy Month provides an opportunity to recognize leadership and stewardship across California's dairy community. Two Dairy Council of California board members—Arlene VanderEyck of Robert VanderEyck & Sons Dairy and Maureen Lemos of Lockwood III Dairy—were recognized among 16 California dairy women leaders as part of the United Nations' International Year of the Woman Farmer.

Through partnerships with schools, health professionals and community organizations, Dairy Council of California is working to connect Californians to the people, programs and resources that support healthy living and strong communities.

To learn more, visit [DairyCouncilofCA.org/JIDM](https://DairyCouncilofCA.org/JIDM).

### **About Dairy Council of California**

Dairy Council of California is a nutrition organization committed to elevating the health of children and communities through the pursuit of lifelong healthy eating patterns. The organization provides science-based nutrition education and collaborates with partners to support community health across California.

### **Bailey Suarez**

Communications Program Manager

Dairy Council of California

[bsuarez@dairycouncilofca.org](mailto:bsuarez@dairycouncilofca.org)

(916) 633-3992

A photo accompanying this announcement is available at

<https://www.globenewswire.com/NewsRoom/AttachmentNg/e5241677-cb2f-4175-952a-869c78d49c28>



Dairy Council of California June is Dairy Month 2026 Campaign

Dairy Council of California June is Dairy Month 2026 Campaign

**Tags**

- [National Dairy Month](#)
- [June is Dairy Month](#)
- [summer meals](#)
- [nutrition education](#)
- [Healthy Eating](#)
- [healthy communities](#)



## Guest Columns

### Perspective: Dairy Nutrition

#### 'Food as Health' approach offers good news for dairy foods

#### *Amy DeLisio*

*Amy DeLisio is CEO of the Dairy Council of California. She is a registered dietitian with a master's degree in public health from the University of Southern California and earned her bachelor's degree in dietetics at Youngstown State University. She contributes this column exclusively for Cheese Market News®.*

As concerns around rising chronic disease and healthcare costs continue to grow, so does interest in "Food is Medicine" initiatives that focus on integrating food and nutrition interventions into healthcare settings to prevent, manage and treat chronic diseases. While this approach holds value, embracing a broader "Food as Health" approach is more compelling, as it introduces a proactive, approachable framework for inspiring people to embrace healthy eating patterns.

At the core of both approaches is the idea that food choices influence health. If we think about it as a continuum rather than competing frameworks, Food as Health, on one end, is about daily food choices to support physical, mental and emotional health. This approach emphasizes that health outcomes are shaped by patterns, and what people consistently eat matters more than isolated choices. Foods that are enjoyable, affordable, culturally relevant and easy to incorporate are more likely to become part of those patterns.

As these healthier habits become routine, food becomes a more intentional tool for disease prevention, helping reduce risk and support specific outcomes through nutrient-dense dietary patterns. Further along the continuum is Food is Medicine, where nutrition is used more precisely, and sometimes prescribed, to manage or treat diagnosed conditions, particularly among higher-risk populations such as pregnant women or older adults. Common methods include produce prescriptions, food boxes and medically tailored meals, often paired with nutrition education from registered dietitian nutritionists.

The distinction between Food is Medicine and Food as Health approaches matters because long-term health is shaped less by short-term interventions and more by what people eat repeatedly. But no matter the framework, both approaches offer good news for dairy foods.

- Dairy foods offer benefits across the lifespan

Dairy foods, including cheese, provide health benefits across the lifespan, supporting optimal growth and development and reducing the risk of chronic disease through a unique combination of essential nutrients that work together at critical stages of growth and development.

From pregnancy to age 2, dairy supports a baby's brain, bone and immune development, supplying key nutrients such as protein, calcium, vitamin D, iodine, choline, zinc and vitamins A and B12 that help establish lifelong health. Starting as early as six months of age, cheese and yogurt serve as nutrient-dense first foods, supporting the rapid growth of bones, muscles and the brain while building early healthy eating habits. As people age, continued dairy intake helps maintain strong bones, muscle mass, cognitive function, metabolic health and overall well-being.

The health benefits of dairy reflect the dairy matrix — the natural structure of dairy foods in which nutrients such as calcium, high-quality protein, fat, vitamins and, in some cases, beneficial bacteria work together. Rather than acting in isolation, these components interact to influence metabolism, inflammation and nutrient absorption as part of an overall diet.

Together, cheese and other dairy foods meet diverse nutrient needs, dietary preferences and cultural food traditions, making it easier for people to build healthy patterns without radical change. Options such as lactose-free milk and yogurt further expand access, ensuring dairy can fit into a range of lifestyles and needs. Within this broader context, cheese represents a familiar and versatile part of the dairy food group. Cheese is widely available, incorporated across cuisines and fits naturally into balanced eating patterns while enhancing flavor, improving satiety and adding nutritional value. From a Food as Health perspective, the familiarity and culinary versatility of cheese matter.

Culinary education and community nutrition programs that teach people how to shop, cook and combine foods help bridge the gap between nutrition and daily life, reinforcing how health-promoting foods can be integrated into home cooking and shared meals without asking people to fundamentally rethink how they eat. Cheese is often featured in these practical applications, as it pairs well with fruit, vegetables and whole grains and fits well in both snacks and meals.

- Nutrition education is a critical piece of the puzzle

Obesity and other chronic diseases are known to disproportionately affect low-resource communities, rural areas, communities of color and other historically marginalized groups that often face limited access to nutritious foods and credible nutrition education.

To be effective, nutrition education must meet people where they are, considering the environments in which they live, learn, work, play and gather. These social and environmental conditions, known as social determinants of health, shape dietary patterns over time and can be leveraged to support healthier choices as part of

everyday life. From a Food as Health perspective, recognizing the influence of individual preferences, cultural traditions and budgets is essential to sustaining healthy eating patterns. Federal nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and school meals play a critical role in improving nutrition security and health.

At Dairy Council of California, we believe that all people, regardless of circumstances, deserve access to nutritious and culturally appropriate foods. We also believe that providing nutrition education in culturally appropriate ways is a key component of improving health for children and families.

To address the need for culturally tailored nutrition education, Dairy Council of California collaborates with partners to create culturally responsive digital resources for families who are from diverse communities, including Hispanic/Latino and Black Caribbean. These materials use traditional foods and spices to ensure relevance and relatability.

Food as Health highlights that physical, mental and emotional health over the long term is built through healthy eating patterns. When nutritious foods are enjoyable, familiar and easy to use, they are more likely to be eaten consistently. Dairy foods support this approach by providing essential nutrients, fitting into diverse cultures and cuisines, and contributing to health across the lifespan.

Collaboration is paramount to the success of a Food as Health approach. By advocating for the science-backed health benefits of dairy in daily eating patterns and investing in nutrition education that is practical and culturally relevant, the dairy community, along with the education and health sectors, can help shape how people think about food and health in a way that supports healthier outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

CMN

The views expressed by CMN's guest columnists are their own opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of Cheese Market News®.

© 2026 Cheese Market News • Quarne Publishing, LLC • [Legal Information](#) • [Online Privacy Policy](#) • [Terms and Conditions](#)

Cheese Market News • Business/Advertising Office: P.O. Box 24 • Sun Prairie, WI 53590 • 608/831-6002  
Cheese Market News • Editorial Office: 5315 Wall Street, Suite 100 • Madison, WI 53718 • 608/288-9090

# Nutrition and Oral Health

By Dr. Abhi Thakkar



## Integrating Evidence-Based Nutrition into Contemporary Dental Practice

Dental caries remains one of the most common chronic diseases, yet many of its key drivers are modifiable within everyday clinical care. Beyond fluoride and oral hygiene, diet, particularly the frequency and pattern of carbohydrate intake, plays a central role in shaping the oral environment by influencing saliva function, biofilm activity, and enamel integrity. As prevention-focused providers, dentists are well positioned to incorporate evidence-based nutrition guidance into routine care as part of comprehensive caries risk management.

Nutrition plays a foundational role in oral health across the lifespan, influencing enamel development, caries risk, periodontal health, and the oral microbiome. A substantial body of dental and public-health literature demonstrates that healthy dietary patterns, rather than single foods, shape the oral environment by affecting saliva composition, biofilm metabolism, and mineral availability for remineralization. Dental teams are uniquely positioned to translate this evidence into practical, patient-centered education during preventive visits, caries risk assessments, and anticipatory counseling.

Dental caries is a multifactorial disease driven by the interaction of fermentable carbohydrates, acidogenic biofilms, host factors, and time. Frequent exposure to free sugars promotes acid production by cariogenic bacteria, leading to enamel demineralization when acid challenges exceed saliva's buffering capacity. In contrast, dietary patterns that support salivary flow and provide adequate mineral substrates can help maintain enamel integrity and oral pH balance. Clinical and educational references in preventive dentistry and oral microbiology consistently emphasize that caries risk is influenced more by frequency and pattern of intake than by isolated foods, reinforcing the importance of counseling patients on overall dietary habits rather than eliminating specific foods. For example, increasing intake of whole, nutrient dense foods including fruits, vegetables and dairy support overall health and wellness.

Several nutrients have well-established roles in tooth development, enamel strength, and periodontal support, including:

- Calcium and phosphorus, which contribute to enamel and dentin mineralization and are integral to ongoing remineralization processes
- Vitamin D, which supports calcium absorption and has been associated with healthy tooth development and bone metabolism
- Protein, which is necessary for tissue repair, immune function, and maintenance of the oral mucosa

Dental nutrition literature emphasizes that these nutrients are most effectively obtained through balanced dietary patterns, rather than supplementation alone, particularly when counseling children, older adults, and patients at elevated risk for caries.

Saliva plays a critical protective role in oral health by buffering acids, delivering calcium and phosphate ions, and supporting antimicrobial activity. Foods that stimulate salivary flow and are consumed as part of structured meals rather than frequent snacking may help reduce prolonged acid exposure. From a microbiological perspective, dietary consistency, texture, and timing influence biofilm metabolism and acid-base balance. Oral microbiology research highlights that diets lower in frequent fermentable carbohydrate exposure support a more stable oral ecosystem, reducing selective pressure for acid-tolerant, cariogenic bacteria.



## Translating Nutrition Science Into Chairside Guidance

Nutrition counseling is most effective when supported by clear, practical, and evidence-based educational tools. Patient handouts that emphasize nutrient adequacy and balanced eating patterns rather than single foods can make these conversations more accessible during preventive visits, caries risk assessments, and anticipatory guidance. Materials developed through public health

health nutrition initiatives are commonly used in dental and community health settings to reinforce consistent, evidence-based messaging around oral health and nutrition.

When paired with plain-language communication, visual aids, and teach-back strategies, these tools can help patients better understand how everyday dietary patterns influence enamel health, saliva function, and caries risk.

## Public-Health Resources and Educational Support

In addition to chairside education, awareness of broader nutrition trends can help dental professionals contextualize patient behaviors and questions. Long-standing monitoring of the nutrition environment has highlighted several trends with implications for oral health practice, including evolving protein needs across the lifespan, increased attention to ultra-processed foods, persistent challenges in children's nutrition, and growing integration of nutrition into healthcare delivery models.

Within this landscape, organizations like Dairy Council of California publish annual analyses -most recently in the 2026 Trends for Educators and Health Professionals that synthesize developments in food systems, nutrition science, and public-health education. When considered alongside established dental and public-health literature, these summaries may offer additional context for understanding how nutrition science is evolving and how it intersects with preventive oral health care.

For dental professionals, nutrition counseling is not about promoting specific products or food groups, but about helping patients understand how everyday dietary patterns influence oral health. By grounding recommendations in established science and leveraging credible public-health resources, dentists can reinforce preventive care, support enamel health, and align oral health messaging with overall wellness goals.



# EMPOWERING PATIENTS THROUGH NUTRITION: STRATEGIES FOR DISCUSSING LACTOSE INTOLERANCE

By Bessie O'Connor, RDN

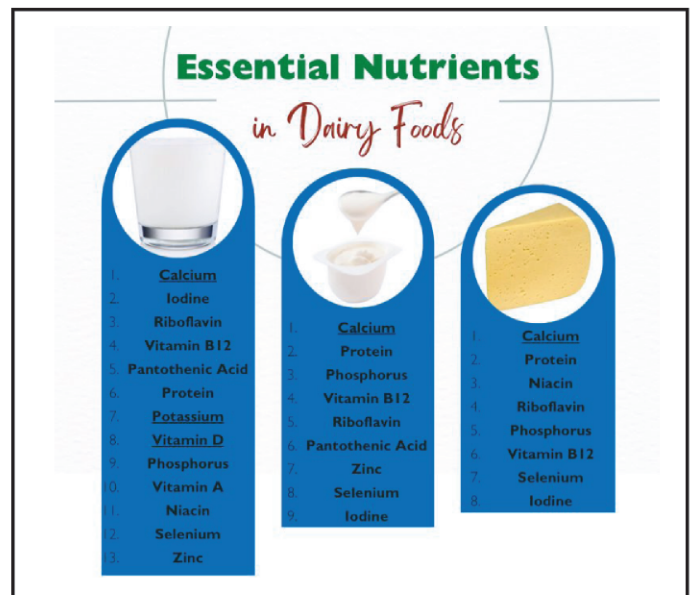
Physician assistants are trusted sources of health information and are positioned to help patients understand the role of nutrition in lifelong health. Clear, consistent and culturally sensitive communication can empower patients to navigate perceived barriers, including lactose intolerance, and meet their nutrient needs.

Nutrient-dense foods help lay the foundation for a healthy eating pattern to support health and reduce the risk of chronic disease, yet most Americans fall short of consuming the recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and dairy. These shortfalls contribute to under consumed nutrients, specifically for calcium, vitamin D, potassium and fiber across all life stages.<sup>1</sup>

Nutrition plays a vital role from pregnancy through older adulthood. During pregnancy, nutrients such as iodine, choline, vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids support fetal brain development.<sup>2</sup> Early childhood presents an important window to introduce nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, iron-rich proteins and dairy, helping children develop a palate for varied flavors and textures.<sup>3</sup> For school-age children, adolescents, adults and older adults, nutrients including calcium, vitamin D, protein and vitamin B12 are essential for bone health, muscle maintenance and cognitive function. Dairy foods are an affordable, accessible and versatile source of many of these nutrients and can

complement a wide range of culturally relevant foods and eating patterns.

Nutrition gaps and barriers to healthy eating are multifaceted. Social drivers of health such as access, affordability and education play a significant role.



Cultural factors also shape food choices in under-recognized ways. A model often used is the cultural iceberg, which illustrates that the visible aspects of culture such as food choices or preparation methods represent only a small portion of what drives eating behaviors.

### Recommended Dairy Servings Per Day

Age	Recommended Amount
12 to 23 months (no longer receiving human milk)	1 2/3 to 2 cups
2 to 3 years	2 cups
4 to 8 years	2 1/2 cups
9+ years	3 cups
<b>What is a Serving?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup of milk or yogurt or</li> <li>• 1 1/2 ounces of cheese</li> </ul>	

Beneath the surface lie beliefs, family traditions, religious practices, childhood food memories and economic realities that influence how and why people eat the way they do.

Misconceptions about lactose intolerance could be a perceived barrier to reaching the recommended two to three servings of dairy each day. By

recognizing the diversity of dairy options, including fermented dairy foods like yogurt, kefir, paneer, queso fresco and low-lactose or lactose-free choices, health professionals can offer practical solutions that honor patient preferences and traditions. These strategies make it easier for individuals with lactose intolerance to include dairy foods in their diet, close nutrient gaps and reduce nutrition-related health disparities.


### Gut Microbiome + Lactose Intolerance

Adding small amounts of dairy to eating patterns over time can support the development of gut bacteria such as *Bifidobacterium* that can help break down lactose and prevent symptoms of lactose intolerance.<sup>5</sup>

### Practical Tips for Talking About Lactose Intolerance With Patients

- 1. Normalize it.**  
Explain that lactose intolerance is common and varies by individual. There are opportunities to include low-lactose dairy foods and avoid experiencing symptoms.
- 2. Focus on symptoms, not labels.**  
Ask about specific symptoms rather than whether the patient is lactose intolerant. Many people self-diagnose and may unnecessarily avoid nutrient-dense foods.
- 3. Offer culturally relevant low-lactose options.**  
Highlight options like yogurt, kefir, cheddar,

mozzarella, parmesan, paneer or lactose-free milk to align with cultural eating patterns.

- 4. Emphasize nutrients of concern.**  
Reinforce how dairy contributes calcium, potassium, vitamin D and high-quality protein, nutrients many people do not get enough of in the diet.
- 5. Validate lived experiences.**  
Acknowledge preferences or past discomfort and focus on personalized strategies that work with the patient's cultural and dietary needs.
- 6. Provide practical strategies.**  
Suggest lactose-free milk, pairing dairy with meals, starting with small portions or choosing fermented dairy like yogurt and kefir. People can often tolerate small amounts of lactose throughout the day.
- 7. Connect back to overall eating patterns.**  
Reinforce that dairy supports healthy dietary patterns and that three servings per day can complement other nutritious foods. For example, have yogurt with fruit in a licuado or parfait or put cheese on a salad or on rice and beans. 



Access an educational handout with tips to include dairy for patients with lactose intolerance.

1. Average Intakes and HEI-2015 Scores: Analysis of What We Eat in America, NHANES 2015-2016, day 1 dietary intake data, weighted. Recommended Intake Ranges: Healthy U.S.-Style Dietary Patterns.
2. Schwarzenberg SJ, Georgieff MK, Committee on Nutrition. Advocacy for improving nutrition in the first 1000 days to support childhood development and adult health. *Pediatrics*. 2018;141(2):e20173716. doi:10.1542/peds.2017-3716
3. Di Prete A, Galloway AT, Farrow C, Bellagamba F, Addressi E. A systematic review of the relation between complementary feeding and children's development. *Curr Nutr Rep*. 2025;14(1):104. doi:10.1007/s13668-025-00692-7
4. U.S. Department of Agriculture; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025*. 9th ed. Washington, DC: US Government Publishing Office; 2020. Available at: [DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov). Accessed December 11, 2025.
5. Duijghuijsen LJ, Looijesteijn E, van den Belt M, et al. Changes in gut microbiota and lactose intolerance symptoms before and after daily lactose supplementation in individuals with the lactase nonpersistent genotype. *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2024;119(3):702-710. doi:10.1016/j.ajcnut.2023.12.016

# SHAPING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

## DISHING UP THE 2026 NUTRITION TRENDS

By: Alyssa McClland, Initiatives and Engagement Director at Dairy Council of California

**S**chool food programs play a unique role at the intersection of nutrition science, policy, daily school operations and student health needs. I have seen firsthand how school meals support student health, academics and overall well-being. One way Dairy Council of California supports this important work is through its Trends program, which provides timely insights into nutrition, health, schools and the broader food system. These insights are translated into practical implications to support informed decision-making as the nutrition landscape continues to evolve.

For more than 40 years, Dairy Council of California's Trends program has tracked shifts across nutrition science, the food system, consumer behavior and the school environment. The program team monitors these trends year-round for educators, school nutrition professionals, dairy industry members and community partners. The goal is simple: provide insights that help schools and industry alike adapt to a rapidly changing nutrition landscape while keeping student health as a top priority.

Below are highlights from the 2026 Trends: *Food and Nutrition Trends for Education and Health Professionals* publication that are relevant to children's health and anyone supporting school meals.



### ***Trend 1:*** ***Rising Protein Demand Drives Food Industry Innovation, With a Spotlight on Dairy***

Protein continues to dominate nutrition conversations among families, students, food manufacturers and health professionals. According to the International Food Information Council's 2025 Food & Health Survey, 70% of Americans actively seek out protein foods, making high-protein diets among the most common dietary patterns in the past year.

Part of this surge in protein interest is linked to emerging weight-loss medications such as GLP-1s, which suppress appetite and heighten the need to prioritize adequate protein to maintain muscle mass. Dairy foods, including milk, yogurt and cheese, offer high-quality protein alongside 12 essential nutrients such as potassium and vitamin B12, supporting both daily nutrient needs and long-term health.

## Protein Demand Fuels Food & Dairy Innovation

## Ultra-Processed Foods Shaping Health Guidance

## Children's Health Crisis Prompts Action

### NUTRITION INTEGRATED INTO HEALTHCARE

#### Implications:

- Nutrition education aligned with evidence-based guidance can improve understanding of how much protein children need and the role high-quality sources like dairy can play.
- Kid-friendly snack options like drinkable yogurts and protein snack packs can support children's nutrient needs and meet parents' desire for high-protein snack options.
- As new protein products enter the market, school nutrition professionals can help families navigate choices to align with health goals and school nutrition standards.

#### **Trend 2:** *Ultra-Processed Foods Are Shaping the Future of Health Guidance*

Ultra-processed foods have become a central focus of nutrition research and policy debates. For California, the signing of AB 1264, named the Real Food, Healthy Kids Act, demonstrates momentum of state-level action to phase out harmful ultra-processed foods in school meals. National data shows that more

than half of daily calories in the United States come from ultra-processed foods, with youth consuming a greater share than adults<sup>2</sup>. This pattern contributes to diet-related chronic disease risks.

It is important to note that a commonly used food classification system called NOVA categorizes foods by processing level; however, this system may oversimplify how foods affect health because it doesn't consider nutrient composition or the food matrix. For example, yogurt is often processed but is linked with health benefits like lower risk of type 2 diabetes and improved weight outcomes. This example underscores the need for nuanced understanding rather than blanket categorization of foods.

Dairy is a strong example of how food processing plays a critical role in ensuring safety and quality. Pasteurization makes raw milk safe for consumption while preserving its nutritional value, enabling it to be used in a wide range of nutritious foods such as fluid milk, yogurt, kefir, cheese, and more. These processes help maintain nutrition quality while making dairy foods safe, accessible, affordable, and nourishing for families.



## Your school food procurement experts

The Shared Plate Strategies team partners with school child nutrition leaders to support:

- Bid development, solicitation and evaluation
- Farm to school and healthy ingredient purchasing
- Buy American tracking
- Procurement Review preparation and corrective actions after audits
- Staff Training

Learn more and sign up for a free 30 minute consultation:



### Implications:

- Definitions and policies around ultra-processed foods should balance scientific nuance with practical guidance to help families and students make informed choices.
- Emphasis on whole and minimally processed foods alongside appropriate processing where it enhances safety, nutrient delivery or palatability can support both health and operational needs.
- Policies and nutrition education should focus on diet quality and accessibility to affordable, nutrient-dense options rather than processing alone.

### **Trend 3:** *Children's Health Crisis Spurs National Action*

Children's health indicators in the United States have worsened over the past 15 years. Rising rates of chronic conditions, including prediabetes, obesity and mental health concerns, present urgent challenges. For example, an estimated 1 in 3 teens has prediabetes,

according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and severe obesity rates continue to climb, particularly among older adolescents and Black children.<sup>3</sup>

Creative partnership strategies are essential to address the health crisis. Across California, initiatives led by grant programs such as the California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program and the California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom Literacy for Life Grants are expanding locally sourced foods for school meals, as well as supporting school gardens and experiential agricultural learning, while private-sector partners like Danone North America and FoodCorps are strengthening hands-on food literacy in schools.

This trend highlights the crucial role that consistent access to balanced nutrition, health screening, education and supportive community environments plays in prevention and early intervention.

*Continued page 14*

## Implications:

- Nutrition education strategies, including hands-on experiences like gardening, cooking and farm-to-fork activities, are valued intervention efforts in schools.
- Addressing the health crisis requires integrated efforts that link classroom, clinical and community settings.
- Sustainable funding is essential to ensure interventions translate into lasting health outcomes for children and families.

### **Trend 4:**

#### ***Food and Health Initiatives Expand as Nutrition Is Integrated into Health Care***

Nutrition is increasingly recognized as critical to disease prevention and management, not just clinical treatment. Food Is Medicine approaches such as prescribed produce, medically tailored meals and food boxes paired with nutrition education have shown positive impacts on diet quality and food security. Efforts to integrate nutrition into health care also include expanding nutrition education for health professionals. Recent initiatives urge medical training programs to include comprehensive nutrition education, reinforcing food's role in patient care and community well-being.

## Implications:

- Schools and health systems can work together to support consistent nutrition messaging across clinical and community settings.
- Partnerships between schools, suppliers and health professionals can expand access to food literacy, nutrition education and culturally relevant meals.
- Aligning operational solutions with evolving health goals ensures that school meals support broader public health priorities.

## ***A Shared Path Forward***

School nutrition is a team effort. Whether working directly in schools or providing support as a supplier or partner, staying informed about emerging trends helps everyone make better decisions for menus, products, partnerships and policies.

I encourage you to explore the full 2026 Trends report and its list of references and consider how these insights can support your role within the school nutrition community.

### **Dairy Council of California Trends web page:**

[DairyCouncilofCA.org/Trends](https://DairyCouncilofCA.org/Trends)

Trends webinars and professional learning opportunities (as available)

By learning together and planning ahead, school meals can continue to be strengthened as a foundation for student health, academic success and well-being, now and into the future.

## ***References:***

1. *International Food Information Council. Americans' Perceptions of Protein. Published July 2025. Accessed December 11, 2025. <https://ific.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/IFIC-Spotlight-Survey-Protein-Perceptions.pdf>*
2. *Williams AM, Couch CA, Emmerich SD, Ogburn DF. Ultra-processed food consumption in youth and adults: United States, August 2021-August 2023. Data Brief No. 536. National Center for Health Statistics website. Published August 2025. Accessed December 11, 2025. [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db536.htm#Key\\_finding](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db536.htm#Key_finding)*
3. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Spotlight on diabetes data: prediabetes in US adolescents. CDC website. Accessed December 11, 2025. <https://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/diabetes/diabetesatlas-spotlight.html>*