



## **Regulatory Alert 2025-01**

### **Dairy Council of California Written Comments**

Dairy Council of California appreciates the opportunity to provide public comments on the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) proposal to amend the California Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Authorized Food List regulations beginning in April 2026.

Pregnancy and early childhood are important periods for growth and development. During this time, access to healthy foods is critical to ensure children receive the right balance of nutrients, including high-quality protein and micronutrients. Milk and dairy products are a vital part of the WIC food package, with scientific evidence supporting the inclusion of two daily dairy servings to help young children grow, move and thrive.

Dairy Council of California applauds the efforts of CDPH to focus on flexibility and inclusion in its recommendations to meet the needs of a diverse population. For example, expanding options for yogurt meets the personal preferences and needs of pregnant women and children while improving diet quality to support healthy microbiome development. However, the proposed changes to expand plant-based milk alternative options raise concerns, as they do not align with current evidence-based guidance. Even if these alternatives can be reformulated to meet nutrient standards, there is no research to support them as a nutritionally equivalent substitute for dairy milk. Following are evidence-based statements for consideration related to the proposed changes to the state WIC Authorized Food List.

#### **Aligning Beverage Options With Evidence-Based Pediatric Guidance**

- Milk and dairy foods and plant-based foods and beverages differ in nutrient content and bioavailability. Authoritative pediatric and nutrition organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and the American Heart Association, emphasize that many plant-based beverages are not recommended for infants and young children because they often contain inadequate protein, lower protein quality and insufficient levels or bioavailability of essential vitamins and minerals. Water and plain milk are the only recommended beverages for children ages 1 through 5.<sup>1</sup> Adding vanilla flavored beverages is in misalignment with these recommendations.

- Unsweetened, fortified soy beverages are recommended if a child has a dairy allergy or to accommodate dietary preferences. Other plant-based alternatives are not recommended due to their wide variability in nutrient content and limited evidence of their impact on diet quality and health outcomes.<sup>1</sup>
- Most plant-based beverages are not nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk, and misuse of certain plant-based beverages can have negative health implications, from failure to gain weight and decreased height to nutrient deficiencies such as rickets.<sup>2</sup>
- Fortified plant-based beverages cannot completely replace milk, and an overall diet adjustment may be needed to ensure adequate intake of key nutrients if non-nutritionally equivalent plant-based beverages are substituted in the diet.<sup>3</sup>
- The recently released 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans emphasizes whole, nutrient-dense foods like dairy, especially in pregnancy and early childhood, and discourages highly processed food, which many plant-based beverages can be considered.<sup>4</sup>

### **Milk Is a Nutrition Powerhouse**

- Dairy foods support brain, bone and immune development from pregnancy and conception to age 2—the first 1,000 days of life—a critical period to establish lifelong health.<sup>5</sup>
- Dairy provides seven of the 14 key nutrients essential for brain development, including iodine, choline, zinc, protein, and vitamins A, D and B12.<sup>6</sup>
- Whole foods have different health properties than foods made by breaking ingredients apart and recombining them. Even when containing similar nutrients, whole foods are digested, absorbed and used by the body more effectively when delivered through a natural food structure known as a food matrix.<sup>7</sup>
- The dairy matrix works in unique ways to positively impact diet quality and support health.<sup>8</sup> The dairy matrix helps explain why milk and dairy foods are associated with lower BMI and reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease.<sup>9,10</sup>

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

Dairy Council of California is a trusted nutrition organization committed to elevating the health of children and communities. Through education, advocacy and multisector collaboration, the organization promotes lifelong healthy eating patterns and advances the role of milk and dairy foods in improving nutrition security and supporting sustainable food systems. With more than

a century of experience, Dairy Council of California continues to lead with evidence-based nutrition science, education and strategic partnerships to build healthier communities.

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