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Milk - An Essential Part of the Japanese School Lunch Program

School milk has a long history in Japan

The first milk in Japanese schools consisted of skim milk powder from US non-government aid agencies distributed around the Tokyo area in 1946. The national Japan school lunch program resulted from a law passed in 1946 and went into effect in 1947. From the beginning, this program included skim milk powder provided as part of international aid supplies. The school lunches were introduced as a forward looking measure not only to counter the malnutrition prevalent in the post-war years, but to also provide for a common nutritional baseline for all school children.

Since that time, milk has remained an essential part of school lunches, with 99 percent of Japanese elementary school children receiving milk with their noon meal.

The pre-war Japanese diet

While nutritious in many respects, the pre-war Japanese diet consisting largely of rice, miso soup, pickled roots and vegetables, was deficient in some vitamins, calcium and protein. This had a negative effect on lifespans, stature, and physical strength.

Benefits of milk in children's diets

Many nutritionists point to the improved overall health of Japanese in the post-war years as the result of the introduction of well-balanced school meals including milk. Among the indicators frequently cited are the increased height and physical strength of today's Japanese. In particular, increased calcium intake is directly related to school milk. Some experts note that the increasing number of world-class athletes from Japan would not have been possible without the focus on better nutrition from early ages.

How has milk provided improved nutrition for Japanese people?

Besides being one of the most well-balanced, nutritious and nutrition-dense foods available, milk contains essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals, especially calcium and protein, which are only found in relatively low amounts in the traditional Japanese diet. Therefore, the

nutritional profile of milk provides an excellent complement to Japanese food.

Milk and "Washoku"

With the recognition of traditional Japanese food or "washoku" as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, some have asked if milk can be properly paired with washoku. Nutritionally, milk is an ideal complement to Japanese food, providing necessary calcium and protein while also allowing for food preparation using lesser amounts of salt. The definition of washoku is based more on a philosophy and style of food preparation, rather than the use of specific ingredients. Japanese rice is probably the only essential component of washoku. Besides rice, washoku can incorporate a wide variety of foods and ingredients, including dairy.

The fact that ninety-nine percent of local school districts choose to include milk as part of school lunches is the best indication that across Japan, administrators and parents understand the value of dairy and the role of milk as an essential part of a balanced, nutritious Japanese meal. Parents and nutritionists consistently support the role of milk in school lunches.

The School Lunch Concept in Japan

Food is about more than nutrition in Japanese schools, the social and cultural aspects of food are also emphasized. Under the "School Lunch Program Act" school meals are part of the education curriculum and as such schools are evaluated, in part, based on their school lunch programs. Students learn about the role of nutrition in lifelong health as well as how food makes it from the farm to the plate. As part of this education, students frequently participate in food production in nearby fields, prepare lunches themselves, and take turns serving meals to their classmates and washing dishes.

Japanese school children are taught about balanced meals, proper nutrition and the role of each component of the typical school lunch. The importance of lifelong muscular and bone health is one topic discussed in class, and milk presented as the food which provides the calcium and protein necessary for proper growth and body maintenance.

The Japanese School Lunch Program including milk has been a tremendous success and the entire Japanese dairy industry feels a great sense of pride in helping Japanese school children receive delicious and nutritious school meals.