

I Gave Up Dairy for 3 Weeks—Here's What Happened to My Body

Trust us, you're not going to see this one coming.

BY REBECCA STRAUS FOR RODALE'S ORGANIC LIFE



Ice cream is one of my great passions in life, followed closely by cheese and milky breakfast tea. I lived for a long time in a happy, dairy-filled bubble, until recently, when I started hearing reports that eating dairy every day was very probably killing me. If you ever venture onto the internet (and you're reading this, so I know you do), you've probably heard that milk is dooming the human race to everything from chronic acne, constant bloating, and obesity to poor bone health, hormonal imbalances, and cancer. Yikes.

And here I'd been thinking milk was a great source of nutrition. I reached out to a bunch of doctors, dieticians, and naturopaths to find out how dairy really affects the human body, but I came away more confused than ever. Everyone seemed to have wildly different opinions about how much dairy is appropriate to eat, whether it should be skim or full-fat, and how it impacts the body.

Some, like Rebecca Lewis, a registered dietician with HelloFresh had great things to say for mighty milk, like that it's chock full of calcium, protein, and brain-boosting vitamin B12. On the other hand, naturopath Gabrielle Francis, author of *The Rockstar Remedy*, says that cow's milk is not great for nutrition or digestion thanks to the pasteurization and homogenization process.

She adds that even if you're not fully lactose intolerant, many people still have sensitivities to the milk protein casein, which can manifest in a range of symptoms that include congestion, headaches, fatigue, bloating, gas, and systemic inflammation, including acne.

And then I heard from Nitin Kumar, a gastroenterologist who told me the scientific literature is very mixed when it comes to dairy. He notes that there are some recent high-quality studies that show full-fat dairy is associated with lower incidence of diabetes and weight gain than low fat, though there's still a lot we don't know about how dairy affects our bodies overall.

Since I've been eating a high-dairy diet for pretty much my whole life, I was interested to find out if I'd feel any different if I gave it up. Plus, I figured I could probably do with fewer ice cream cones in my life. Resolute, I bought my first-ever carton of almond milk and firmly told my boyfriend that we couldn't go out for ice cream until this was over. Here's what happened.

AT FIRST, I FELT LIKE A CLEAN-EATING GODDESS.

On my first dairy-free day I ordered a vegan rice bowl with tofu from my office cafeteria and felt extremely virtuous. It was surprisingly filling and tasty, and I found myself thinking, "I should make this at home!" I followed it up by packing salads in my lunch for the next few days and was immensely pleased with myself for sticking to the straight and narrow.

BUT THEN I WAS SAD.

My feelings of righteousness were short-lived. Every time I ate a salad or sandwich, I'd catch myself wistfully thinking, "This would be so much better with cheese." And then I'd feel sorry for myself that I wasn't allowed to have any thanks to this silly rule I'd imposed on myself. I soon got tired of salad every day, but instead of experimenting with new lunch options like the glorious rice bowl, I defaulted to peanut butter and jelly and wallowed in my misery.

I DISCOVERED I HAVE ZERO SELF-CONTROL.

Knowing I couldn't have dairy just made me want it all the more. So I have to admit that I cheated a bunch of times. (Whoops!) I mean, I couldn't *not* have a cheeseburger and milkshake when I went to the local fair—it's a necessary rite of summer! And I wasn't about to pass up cake and ice cream at my grandfather's 90th birthday party, not when I needed it to distract me from a little too much family time. And then there was an employee potluck where someone made an amazing tomato and mozzarella salad...you get the picture. I am WEAK.

I FELT AND LOOKED EXACTLY THE SAME AS BEFORE.

Despite my repeated lapses in self-discipline, I did eat far less dairy in these three weeks than probably at any other point in my life. Not using cow's milk on my daily bowl of cereal is what really put a dent in my dairy consumption. All told, I had eleven completely dairy-free days, five where I only ate one dairy item, and five where I just caved completely. That has to count for something, right? But I didn't notice anything different about my body or my energy levels day-to-day. My weight stayed consistent, as did my acne, and I didn't feel any more or less bloated, even on the days when I had no dairy. Granted, I'm sure some experts would say that all my cheating ruined my whole experiment, but I thought it would make at least *some* difference in my skin or belly fat.

I BECAME INCREASINGLY SKEPTICAL.

I'm not sure what I really expected when I went dairy-free—to feel lighter and thinner and more energized, I suppose. But none of that happened, and the longer I continued my (semi) dairy purge, the more convinced I became that there was zero benefit in totally depriving myself of something that makes me so happy. I don't have a dairy allergy, my weight is healthy, and I rarely get sick, so how could it be hurting me?

I did some more research and found an article by David Katz, president of the American College of Lifestyle Medicine and a professor of public health at Yale University School of Medicine. He delves into the huge controversy surrounding dairy and nutrition and comes to the very benign conclusion that there's no good reason to suppose dairy is a necessary part of a healthy diet—but there's equally no reason to suppose it can't be.

Most interesting to me is his explanation of why some cultures have a tradition of consuming animal milk, while others do not. It has to do with our evolutionary history as humans. Somewhere along the line, ethnic groups with a history of pastoralism evolved to be able to digest milk beyond childhood—these societies gained *lactose tolerance* because it presented an evolutionary advantage in their way of living. In other societies where there wasn't a tradition of pastoralism, people remained—and their descendants still remain—lactose intolerant. I myself come from a long line of cheese-eating Germans, and so I say: Pass the cheese, please!

WHEN THE 3 WEEKS WERE UP, I ATE 3 ICE CREAM CONES IN ONE WEEKEND.

It was glorious.