

mozzarella, anyone?

DISA TAN delivers reality bites on cheese and how some types may be better than others for you and your growing child.



Does your child constantly raid the fridge for that tasty slice or wedge of cheese? And do you feel at peace knowing that your peckish prince or princess is getting the healthy snack that they need?

Yes, cheese is a rich source of protein and calcium, acknowledges Ms Jaclyn Reutens, clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants and it is one popular food that many parents choose with confidence to build up on their young children's protein and calcium intake.

One book, *Healthy children's lunches*, even cites research that "a little cheese before bedtime does not give you nightmares" and that "its amino acid content can actually help to reduce stress and improve sleep."

But know this: experts warn that eating too much cheese – and the *wrong* types of cheese – may have some adverse effects on your child's well-being.

Go easy on the yellow

Explains Ms Reutens: "Too much cheese will increase your child's saturated fat and sodium

levels. While it is not so crucial to health at these ages, it is good to cultivate good eating habits and preference for healthier foods as well as portion control at a young age.

“You can gain weight if you eat too much cheese,” she adds. “Too much cheese in the long term will increase saturated fat intake which will increase cholesterol levels. High cholesterol levels can start to damage blood vessels in childhood. Also, a high sodium intake from over-eating cheese will increase the risk of hypertension.”

So, how much cheese is right for your child? And with the wide variety of cheese available in the market, how do you pick the right kinds, nutrition-wise, from the overwhelming variety available?

Firstly, the recommended intake for calcium is about 500mg per day for one to three-year olds and 800mg per day for four to eight-year olds. This is the equivalent of two to three servings of milk products or cheese daily.

Make the right choices

As for the cheese types to go for, Ms Reutens recommends reduced fat cheese for pre-schoolers from three to six years old. She elaborates: “I would recommend cheese that is

the highest in calcium content but low in fat and sodium. This is not always an easy choice as the cheese can also be high in both calcium and fat content. Therefore you have to read the food label and pick the best balance of nutrients.”

She adds: “Hard cheeses like mozzarella and cheddar cheese have reduced fat options that contain 10-16 grams of fat per 100 grams. They can go up to 20 to 40 grams of fat per 100 grams. On the other hand, soft cheeses like ricotta, cottage cheese or cream cheese can go as low as less than 10 gram fat per 100 gram.”

Cheeses to avoid

Ms Reutens names unpasteurised cheese as one of the cheeses your child should avoid.

She explains: “Soft cheeses like brie, feta, camembert and goat’s cheese can be made from pasteurised and unpasteurised milk. Cheese made from raw milk carries the risk of food contamination from disease-causing microorganisms and listeria monocytogenes. So, check food labels to see if they are pasteurised.”

She adds: “Limit your child’s intake of smoked cheeses as they tend to be higher in salt. Otherwise, most cheeses are safe to consume.”

a guide to buying cheese

Ms Jaclyn Reutens from Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants shows you how to make cheese choices wisely with this nutritional table:

cheese	Protein (g)	Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Calcium (mg)
Mozzarella	26.0	22	375	875
Sliced Cheese (Cheddar)	24.9	33	621	721
Gouda	26.3	30.6	706	813
Parmesan	38	32.5	1425	1150
Brie	19.5	29.0	605	470
Feta	17.5	23.1	1069	325

To note: - Mozzarella is a good source of calcium and has the lowest fat content and sodium content.
 - Parmesan contains the highest calcium content but also has the highest sodium and fat content.
 - Feta has a low calcium content but high sodium level.