

In our short-term thinking, we worry about the milk price, whether or not to expand the herd, but how many of us have thought about a future with no dairy products? I did not until I read a very disturbing article in August's Discover magazine titled "Worrying About Milk."

The following is a brief synopsis of the article: A nutritional biochemist from Cornell University who grew up on a dairy farm and consumed dairy products as a youngster, no longer consumes dairy products because of what he discovered over the last three decades doing animal research.

He blames consumption of dairy products for the high incidence of breast cancer and prostate cancer in North America. The theory stated in the article is that cow's milk unnaturally stimulates enzymes and growth

hormones in the human body that increase the risk of various diseases.

The article further states that cow's milk might not even build strong bones. The article tended to be one-sided with little reference to research that shows the benefits of dairy products.

These studies conducted to explore the question of dairy products and cancer took place with rats. A series of lab experiments at Cornell and Virginia Tech found that rats given a brief initial exposure to aflatoxin (a known carcinogen) tended to develop liver cancer when fed casein, the main protein in milk.

The theory is that tiny precancerous lesions accumulate throughout the body because of random mutations or exposure to small amounts of carcinogens. These lesions normally remain dormant, but a steady dose of

cancer promoters in the diet (in this article-casein) may override natural defenses against the growth of tumors.

However, it was noted in this article that lab rats often do not get cancer from suspected food carcinogens unless they receive enormous doses.

These were numerous research studies cited showing a link between people consuming a high level of dairy foods and the likelihood of them developing a certain kind of cancer. These studies examined thousands of people over several years.

The problem I find with these types of studies is there is no reference to the other factors, or hidden variables, that may contribute to a higher incidence of health problems.

For example, did the people in the studies that consumed

higher levels of dairy products tend to be smokers, alcohol drinkers, overweight, consumers of high fat products versus low fat products, heavy consumers of other less nutritious foods (coffee, soda, etc.), less physically active, etc.?

Another aspect of the article compared the incidence of certain disease in other countries versus North America. The article showed a lower incidence of these specific health problems among Asians, who consume very little milk and certain cancers tend to be rare, versus the higher incidence in North America and Europe where intake of dairy foods is greater.

Are there not other aspects of Asian diets, genetics and lifestyles that vary from ours that may explain the difference? Unfortunately, the article was rather weak in acknowledging these arguments.

The most disturbing part of

the article was in the last paragraph. It states that people can get all the calcium and protein they need from nondairy and plant sources. As an example, a school system in Miami, Florida has created award winning school lunch programs that do not include meat or dairy foods.

Raising children without exposure to dairy and meat products could possibly result in our future generations not accepting the products that we all work so hard to produce. Animal agriculture is dealing with major issues that are not going to disappear, i.e. environment and nutrition.

This article illustrates that the dairy industry has to be proactive on educating the consumer and marketing the benefits of agriculture and the products produced.

Virginia A. Ishler, Program Assistant, Dairy and Animal Science Extension

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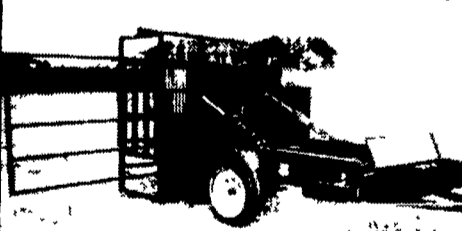

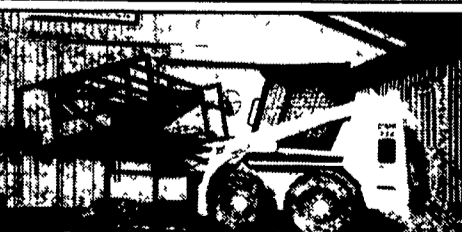
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