

Skim to slim: Parents on food aid encouraged to wean kids off whole milk

February 15 2009, By Mandy Locke

Nutritionists responsible for helping the poorest of kids eat right are taking a tough stand: Whole milk is hurting Junior's waistline.

It's a tough pitch. They're combating cravings for the creamiest, thickest of Daisy the cow's offerings.

Last month, the federal government stopped paying for whole milk for pregnant and nursing mothers and children older than 2. Mothers can receive vouchers to buy the fattiest milk only for their babies younger than 2. Moms and older siblings must wean themselves off whole milk and turning to low-fat varieties like 2 percent, 1 percent or skim.

The new rule is national. In places like North Carolina, though, notorious for rearing some of the fattest kids, it's urgent. Eating healthy, eating right, is an even bigger challenge for the poorest families.

"It's simple. Our children don't need that saturated fat and calories," said Alice Lenihan, head of the state's WIC program, which offers food vouchers to about 272,000 low-income women, infants and children in North Carolina to ensure they get proper nutrition.

Nudging people toward low-fat milk would be a tough sell, nutritionists feared. While fewer people have been buying whole milk over the last 50 years, it still has loyalists. Many parents drank it as children when few worried about counting calories. There's a richness to it that can make a bowl of cereal seem like breakfast and lunch. By comparison, skim milk

seems, to many, like colored water.

Health departments across the state have turned to creative marketing tactics to sell WIC clients on low-fat milk. Many have hosted blind taste tests of whole milk versus low fat when recipients come in to collect their vouchers.

At Wake County, N.C., Human Services this month, Mary Jane Hearon talked to a cluster of young parents about nutrition. Hearon, who works with the state's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, taught the parents a recipe for low-fat bran muffins and passed out samples with a Dixie cup full of milk. She didn't divulge it was 1 percent.

Chavon Cancel put the cup to her daughter's lips. One-year-old Kamayah grimaced and pulled back.

Later, when Hearon revealed that she had poured them samples of 1-percent milk, Cancel nodded.

"No wonder she didn't want to drink it," Cancel said.

The switch to healthier milk is the first of several sweeping changes the WIC program plans this year. This fall, it will introduce whole-grain cereals and breads, in addition to fruits and vegetables.

The motivation is simple: kids are too fat in this culture.

North Carolina earns poor marks in the fight against childhood obesity, ranking fifth among states in the most overweight adolescents.

The list of contributing factors is long, including junk food, bad genes and video games keeping kids glued to the television.

But fatty milk is something WIC managers feel they can control. A cup of whole milk packs eight grams of fat and 150 calories. One percent milk offers the same nutritional value but with a quarter of the fat and fewer calories.

Milk straight from the cow is naturally whole, with about 4 percent fat. At dairy farms, machines pull the fat apart from the milk, then combine it with the skim product to make the right mix. With less demand for whole milk, dairy producers are turning the extra fat into cream and adding more richness to ice creams.

The shift in demand between whole and low-fat milks had long been in motion. Dairy producers don't know whether the change in the WIC program will upset their business.

"It there's a shift because of demand, I'm certain the price will adjust, too," said Carl Hollifield, business manager for N.C. State University's Food Science and Dairy Processing facility.

Nutritionists long urged WIC clients to steer clear of whole milk in favor of the lower-fat versions. Their message: Those rolls on your toddler's thighs might look cute, but they're not good for his heart. But food habits, they've learned, are hard to break.

"It's very easy to do the preaching," said Victoria M. Adeleke, a nutritionist with Wake County's WIC program. "But, in the stores, when no one is watching, they pick up what they like to pick up."

Montriel Wilder gets the switch to low-fat milk. At the nutrition presentation, his 7-month old son Devien squirmed in his lap, sucking a bottle of formula. Wilder has already been worried about his son's weight.

"He was born at 10 pounds, and he just keeps growing and eating and growing and eating," Wilder said. "His grandma just keeps feeding him all kinds of stuff."

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