



## MEDIA RELEASE

An initiative by the  
Consumer Education Project of Milk SA

# Why dairy has a significant place in sustainable diets

Many South African consumers are becoming more aware of the climate change impacts of their food choices and are looking for practical ways to shift towards a more sustainable diet. Including more vegetables and fruit, whole-grains and legumes in our family meals is certainly more environmentally friendly. However, sustainable diets must also be healthy diets and because of their unmatched nutritional quality, animal-based foods such as dairy play a vital role in sustainable diets.

It's important to understand what the experts mean when they talk about sustainable diets. Environmental factors are an important consideration but so are nutritional needs, affordability and whether the diet is culturally acceptable. A sustainable diet must be one that is accessible, affordable as well as good for the planet and people's well-being.

According to registered dietitian at Rediscover Dairy, Maretha Vermaak, "A healthy diet consists mostly of plant-based foods and includes moderate amounts of eggs, dairy, poultry, fish, and meat. This balance of a variety of foods is really important."



Because diets are culturally based and geographically influenced, different populations have certain nutritional challenges. For instance, in South Africa calcium intake is low across all age groups, and researchers have attributed this in part to a low consumption of dairy. Therefore, the South African food-based dietary guidelines encourage the consumption of milk, yoghurt or maas on a daily basis.



Professor Mieke Faber, Extraordinary Professor at North West University explains, “The impact of dietary shifts on health and the environment is context-specific due to diverse food systems and discrepancies in food security and nutritional status across and within countries. In most high-income countries, consumption of animal-source foods should be limited because of high risks of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and environmental footprints. So, shifts towards a more plant-based diet will simultaneously reduce health risks and environmental impact. However, in many low- and middle-income countries with a

Diets that are predominately or exclusively plant-based may lack several micronutrients, such as vitamin B12, iron, calcium, and zinc, which are essential for the body's functioning and the prevention of nutritional deficiencies. Not only are animal-source foods such as dairy rich in most of these micronutrients, but their bioavailability is also higher compared to plant-sourced foods. Another important consideration when it comes to sustainable diets is that consuming a diet that exceeds a person's energy requirements is regarded as an environmental burden. Reducing overconsumption and improving the energy balance of your diet will have both health and environmental benefits. This is relevant in countries such as South Africa where we have such high rates of overweight and obesity.”



high prevalence of nutrient deficiencies and undernutrition such as South Africa, diversifying the diets and increasing the intake of animal-source foods will be needed to supply adequate amounts of essential nutrients, with a consequent increase in environmental impact. Under these circumstances, meeting dietary requirements and nutrition targets would be the priority, with a somewhat higher environmental impact as a trade-off.”



As you think of ways to make your family’s diet more climate friendly and sustainable, you need to take into account healthy balance and nutritional quality as well as consider other factors around food consumption that impact on the environment:

- > **Combine animal and plant-based foods** - enjoy nutritious and sustainable meals by thoughtfully combining animal-sourced foods—such as dairy, with a variety of fresh vegetables and fruits in appropriate portions. Some ideas include planning meals that use a variety of different coloured

vegetables, adding leafy green and tomato to your cheese sandwich and spinach and red peppers to an omelette.

- > **Limiting highly processed foods** - reduce the amounts of nutrient-poor sugary beverages, salty snacks and high fat take-aways that you purchase every month. Instead focus your food budget on food choices that are nutrient-dense such as fresh vegetables, fruit, milk, yoghurt and maas. Cultivate an interest in cooking from scratch, and make preparing healthy meals and lunchboxes a fun, team effort in your home.



- > **Reducing your food waste** - many consumers don't realise that our collective food waste is a major contributor (around 10%) to global greenhouse gas emissions. So, cutting down our food waste is one of the most effective ways that consumers can lead more climate friendly lives. This means planning your meals, shopping only for what you need, storing food correctly, freezing surplus food whenever possible, giving away excess food and making sure you use perishable food items such as dairy before their expiry dates.

> **Recycling, reusing and repurposing food packaging waste** - while food packaging has a protective role, it is a major contributor to environmental pollution. Actively reduce your use of single-use plastics and use reusable shopping bags for your food shopping. In addition, set up a family system for recycling, reusing or repurposing your food packaging waste to reduce your household's impact on the environment.



Growing anxiety about the climate crisis is motivating more people to be open to adapting their diets and this presents an opportunity for us to also improve our food choices for better health. Every shift we make towards climate friendly lifestyles must include our focus on nutritional quality and its impact on our well-being, all within the framework of our food budgets. This means that nutrient-dense, affordable, accessible foods such as dairy will have a long future when it comes to being part of sustainable diets.



**World Milk Day** will be celebrated on Saturday, 1 June 2024. This year's theme focuses on the role of dairy in delivering quality nutrition to nourish the world. Activities and events will be highlighted on social media channels using the hashtags #WorldMilkDay & #EnjoyDairy and will include videos from dairy farmers and producers around the world highlighting the sustainability practices that are in place on today's farms and production facilities.



For more dairy ideas join the RediscoverDAIRY Facebook page:  
[www.facebook.com/RediscoverDAIRY](https://www.facebook.com/RediscoverDAIRY)

For find out more about dairy's role on healthy diets, visit [www.rediscoverdairy.co.za](http://www.rediscoverdairy.co.za)