

Top 5 Reasons Milk is Good for Swimmers

By Chris Rosenbloom, PhD, RD, CSSD

Many athletes ask me, "Is milk really a good muscle-building and recovery drink?" The answer is yes! While milk may not have the amped up marketing of other protein-rich drinks, milk has many benefits for swimmers. Here are the top reasons why milk should be a part of every athlete's nutrition plan.

1. Milk has not one but two protein sources, whey and casein. Many studies have shown that the power of these two protein sources is superior to a single protein (like soy protein) for stimulating muscle protein repair and growth. And, a recent study pitted 5 different protein sources (skim milk, soy milk, steak, boiled egg and an energy bar with protein) against each other to determine which was better at boosting amino acid levels in the blood after exercise. The clear winner was skim milk for its ability to give athlete's an anabolic advantage. The researchers think that not only are the proteins in milk beneficial, but that also a liquid source of protein is superior to a solid protein when it comes to muscle building.
2. Milk is rich in the amino acid leucine. It is believed that leucine, one of the branched chain amino acids, is a "trigger" for muscle protein growth.
3. In addition to protein, milk contains a natural sugar, lactose. Carbohydrate plus protein has been shown to be good for endurance athletes and not just for muscle building. Exercisers who drank low-fat chocolate milk had better aerobic fitness and body composition compared to those who drank a carbohydrate-only beverage or water as a recovery beverage. The authors of study concluded that milk is "nature's sports drink."
4. Milk is a great source of vitamins and minerals needed by young active swimmers. One cup of low-fat plain or flavored milk contains as much calcium as 10 cups of raw spinach, as much vitamin D as $\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce of cooked salmon, as much vitamin A as 2 hard-boiled eggs, and as much potassium as a banana. Milk is also a good source of the B-vitamin, riboflavin, needed to unlock the energy stored in food.
5. Fat-free milk has the same nutrients as whole, 2% fat milk and flavored milk. The sugar in low-fat chocolate milk isn't as high as you might think...flavored milk contributes only 3% of added sugars to the diet of young people, far less than other sugar sweetened beverages like tea, soft drinks, lemonade or fruit punch.

There are some athletes who are allergic to milk and for those athletes, soy milk provides a good source of protein that can contribute to muscle growth but not as rapidly as dairy milk. Almond milk is not a good source of protein so athletes who like almond milk should obtain protein from other sources.

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