



Can Milk Sweetened With Aspartame Still Be Called Milk?

March 6, 2013

by: **Allison Aubrey**, NPR

By adding artificial sweeteners to flavored milk, the dairy industry hopes to boost flagging consumption in schools. But if the industry gets its way, the front-of-the-package labels wouldn't note that it's "diet milk."



Morgan Barnett, 7, drinks from containers of 1 percent milk and chocolate milk during lunch at a school in St. Paul, Minn., in 2006.

Eric Miller/AP

The dairy industry has a problem. Despite **studies** demonstrating milk's nutritional benefits, people are drinking less and less of it.

Even children are increasingly opting for water or other low-cal options — including **diet soda** and artificially sweetened sports drinks.

So how can milk — especially school kids' favorite, **chocolate milk** — compete in the low-cal arena? The dairy industry has a strategy: Swap the sugar that's added to flavored milks for a zero-calorie sweetener such as **aspartame** (or other options such as plant-based **stevia**).

Now, in order to pull this off, the dairy industry has some regulatory hoops to jump through. Currently, if dairy producers want to add an artificial or no-cal sweetener, the resulting beverage is no longer allowed to be called milk (it wouldn't meet the FDA's technical definition of milk).

So the dairy industry is **petitioning** the Food and Drug Administration to change the standard of what qualifies as milk. The industry wants the iconic MILK label to remain on the front of the package, without any mention of the reduced calories — or the added artificial sweeteners (at least, not on the front label). And the FDA has opened up this petition for public comment.

"Kids don't like the term 'low-calorie,' " says Greg Miller of the National Dairy Council. "It's a turnoff."

Some school districts have banned flavored milk because of the high-calorie content. And some **studies** suggest that when you take chocolate milk out of schools, consumption of milk declines. During a phone interview, Miller told The Salt that the industry's petition is aimed at offering school districts a lower-calorie milk option that kids will actually want to drink.

Miller says the petition does not seek to change existing regulations that require added sweeteners (such as aspartame or stevia) to be named in the list of ingredients — usually found on the back of a container.

"We are not trying to be sneaky," Miller says.

But so far, lots of folks seem skeptical of the plan.

More than 90,000 people have joined a new **online petition** organized by SumOfUs.org, a consumer advocacy group, opposing the dairy industry's petition.

And nutrition experts are weighing in, too, including **Barry Popkin** of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has studied the links between sugary drinks and obesity. If the goal is to reduce the amount of calories that kids get from sweetened beverages, then removing sugar from flavored milk is one option, he says.

"If the option is flavored (milk) with diet (sweetener) vs. regular sugar, then diet (sweetener) is favored," he wrote to us in an email.

But he says there's no evidence that kids need flavored milk, such as chocolate milk. "It has not been shown to increase milk intake," he says. The dairy industry disagrees.

And the dairy industry's petition is also facing opposition from school food advocates.

"I think it's unconscionable," says school chef **Ann Cooper**, who's been working to reform the way kids eat at school. She argues that parents and students will have a hard time discerning what's in the milk.

"This is nothing but a marketing ploy by the dairy industry to support milk sales," Cooper tells The Salt via email. "We all need to let the USDA know that we oppose 'hiding' ingredients in milk as a way to increase profits for the dairy industry!"

As a mom, I understand why parents want to know whether the chocolate milk their kids are being served at school contains artificial sweeteners such as aspartame.

And the question lots of parents are asking is one of transparency: Can we *really* expect kids to read the fine print on the back of the bottle to know what they're getting?

But Miller says if school districts were to choose to add a non-caloric sweetener to chocolate milk, parents would not be left in the dark. School administrators would likely inform parents of the change by putting it on menus, websites and newsletters.

What do you think?

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