

## CHEESE IT UP

January 20 is National Cheese Lovers Day. There are over 2,000 different types of cheeses that can be enjoyed alone or added to other dishes. Many people will say they love cheese, but they often express concerns about the saturated fat in cheese is bad for their heart or that cheese causes weight gain. Can we enjoy the cheese we love without guilt?

The first thing we can love without guilt is that natural cheese can be considered a whole food. Whole foods are generally exactly how nature made them or processed minimally without added fats, salt, or sugar.

Cheese has been produced for thousands of years using fermentation to preserve the perishable milk. While there are many different ways to make cheese, the most common method involves acidification and coagulation of the milk (usually from cows, goats, or sheep), separation of curds and whey, and then salting, shaping, and ripening the cheese.

### Basic Classifications Of Cheese

- **Fresh** unripened cheeses are soft, spreadable cheeses with creamy textures and very mild flavors. The texture of fresh cheese also depends on how much whey and moisture is drained from the final product. Some popular cheeses in this category include: Cottage Cheese, Cream Cheese, Feta, Fresh Chèvre/Goat, Mascarpone, Queso Fresco, and Ricotta.
- **Soft-ripened** cheeses have soft, sometimes fuzzy, or wrinkly rinds. The cheeses in this category have a bloomy white rind created by a natural mold that is entirely edible. Look for Brie, Camembert, and Soft-Ripened Goat Cheese.
- **Semi-soft** cheeses have a smooth interior, high moisture content, and a short aging period. Examples are Fontina, Havarti, Jarlsberg, Mozzarella, and Muenster.
- **Semi-hard** cheeses tend to be older, firmer, and well-balanced. Semi-hard cheeses include Cheddar, Gouda, Monterey Jack, Provolone, and Swiss.
- **Hard** cheeses make them the best cheese for grating, because they are salty, sharp, and tend to be sandy in texture. Asiago, Manchego, Parmesan, and Romano are examples of hard cheeses.
- **Blue** types of cheese have distinctive blue veins created by adding mold during the cheese-making process. The flavor ranges from mild to assertive to quite pungent. Examples include Danish Blue, Gorgonzola, Roquefort, and Stilton.

Cheese lovers should celebrate the many health benefits of eating cheese. Cheese contains high-quality protein and also calcium. Most Americans do not consume enough calcium, an important building block for teeth and bones. Cheese also contains other vital nutrients such as phosphorus, vitamin A, vitamin B12, and zinc.

American dietary guidelines recommend individuals ages 9 and older consume at least three servings of milk, cheese, or yogurt each day, and children ages 4–8 years need 2½ cups per day. One serving of cheese is 1 1/2 ounces of hard cheese, 1/3 cup of grated cheese, or 2 ounces of processed cheese.

Some people are lactose intolerant which makes their bodies sensitive to cheese. This is because cheese contains lactose, which is a sugar. People who are lactose intolerant lack the enzyme needed to digest the lactose. Too much lactose leads to bloating and gas for people with an intolerance. Cheeses such as Parmesan and Swiss have very low amounts of lactose and may be tolerated better than other cheeses.

As with all foods, it is important to read the nutritional labels and mindfully choose what you will eat. Not all cheeses have the same nutritional content.

Discover and taste a new cheese today. Enjoy the cheese you love this National Cheese Lovers Day.

(Sources: [www.dietaryguidelines.gov](http://www.dietaryguidelines.gov); [www.healthline.com](http://www.healthline.com); [www.healthyeating.org](http://www.healthyeating.org); [www.usdairy.com](http://www.usdairy.com))