

# Milk on the School Menu

*An overview of milk and its distribution in schools worldwide, objectives and achievements*

## Social Desk

Iran's school lunch program, with its accompanying glass of milk, dates back to the late 1950s. During that time, poverty was widespread in Iran, and many children experienced poor living conditions, malnutrition, and lacked food security. As a result, there were sparks of a school meal initiative inspired by leading industrialized countries, which also took root in Iran. The goal of this initiative was to ensure basic nutritional necessities for students. Over time, in the 1970s, the program expanded to include a glass of milk, biscuits, fruits, and bean stew.

According to available accounts, it appears that during the 1950s, 1960s, and the first half of the 1970s, free meals for students in Iran didn't follow specific rules or patterns. However, since 1977, the distribution of free meals became more organized and expanded nationwide. This policy continued for several years following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, in the early 1990s, due to severe government budget restrictions, the free meal program for students came to an end.

Years later, as the country began to experience economic growth and improved living conditions, the long-abandoned school meal program was replaced with the free distribution of milk in schools, commonly known as "school milk." The program was initially implemented on a trial basis in 2000, covering 420,000 students. In 2001, the plan was officially put into effect, starting in elementary schools in Tehran and gradually expanding nationwide to eventually cover 1,200,000 students who received free milk.

However, Iran's school milk program faced various challenges and setbacks over the years, and in 2017, it came to an abrupt halt due to budgetary issues.

Now, after a six-year interruption, the country's school milk program has been reinstated, with the aim of improving the physical and mental health of students. Aligned with the country's Fundamental Reform Document of Education, the initiative focuses on promoting a culture of milk consumption. A culture much needed in Iran, since despite having the biggest capacity for producing dairy products in the Middle East, Iran has a per capita consumption of about 50 kilograms a year, which is approximately one-third of the global average. In the current phase of the program, elementary school students nationwide receive milk twice a week.

Sources proclaim that the current administration has allocated a budget of \$50 million until mid-March 2024, sourced from the Targeted Subsidies Organization, and the milk containers provided to students will be unsalable and will feature printed messages regarding culture, health, and hygiene.

This offers a good opportunity to dig a little deeper into milk, posing questions like why milk is considered a superfood these days, why it is a dietary staple in many advanced countries, and why drinking it is considered imperative for young children.

## White elixir

First, let's take a look at the origins and reasons for consuming this wholesome drink. According to Hannah Velten, author of 'Milk: A Global History,' humans are "the only species to consume milk past weaning."

One reason why milk came to be considered a favorable food can be traced back to our ancient ancestors who had access to it. The domestication of various animals like sheep, goats, cows, water buffaloes, reindeer, camels, horses, and donkeys provided our ancestors with a limited but valuable supply of milk. This modest resource, although incomparable to today's standards, granted humans significant survival advantages.

For starters, milk served as a lifeline during times of food and water scarcity in Africa and the Middle East, offering sustenance when resources were scarce. It also offered crucial additional nutrients to diets that primarily relied on cereals. Moreover, milk provided a source of vitamin D and served as an alternative to strong sunlight. Additionally, it proved to be a safer alternative to water, free from parasites that could pose health risks. (Velten, 2010)

Ancient civilizations like the Sumerians, Egyptians, Persians, and Greeks obtained milk from domesticated animals and recognized its nutritional value, especially for infants. In the Classical Era, Hippocrates praised milk for its nourishing properties. Velten writes, "Milk

was the 'white elixir' in many countries and mythologies." She points out that even today, "people who have trouble sleeping are advised to drink a soothing mug of warm milk before bed to help ease them into sleep."

During the Middle Ages, milk consumption continued, with monasteries playing a major role. The "white liquor" served as a crucial source of animal protein for individuals who couldn't afford meat. While cows were the primary source, drinking milk from goats and sheep was also customary. However, fresh milk was typically reserved for the very young or elderly, with adults consuming it only if they were poor or sick. Instead, poor adults would often opt for buttermilk, whey, soured milk, or diluted milk. The limited availability of technology to prevent spoilage made fresh milk less common compared to other dairy products. In upper-class kitchens, fresh milk occasionally found its way into stews, although maintaining its freshness in large quantities proved to be a challenge, leading to the use of almond milk as a substitute. However, cheese held far greater significance as a staple food, particularly among the plebeian.

The major shift, however, came with the Industrial Revolution when, through increased production and better preservation methods, milk became more widely available and started appearing on more tables.

