



Home > Global > Latest Research Summaries > New Research from JACI > Can childhood asthma be prevented by farm milk consumption?

Can childhood asthma be prevented by farm milk consumption?

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Numerous epidemiological studies have shown that children who grow up on traditional farms are protected from asthma, hay fever and allergic sensitization. Early-life contact with livestock and consumption of unprocessed cow's milk have been identified as the most effective protective exposures. Milk is a complex food that consists of a variety of components that might be responsible for this protective effect and it is still unclear how farm milk consumption confers protection.

Loss et al. shed light upon the association of farm milk consumption in childhood and the development of allergies in their latest article based on the large European GABRIEL study (a multidisciplinary study to identify the genetic and environmental causes of asthma in the European Community) that was published in *The Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology* (JACI).

Milk consumption patterns from pregnancy to school age were retrospectively assessed in a cross-sectional study of 8,334 school-aged children in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. The health status of the participants was determined by questionnaires and blood samples. In a sub-group, milk samples were collected at the participants' homes as they were consumed by the child and detailed analyses of milk constituents were performed. The authors then related milk drinking habits and attributes of the collected milk samples to the allergic health statuses of the children taking into account other relevant factors that determine asthma and allergies.

The researchers found that children consuming raw farm milk had a significantly lower risk to develop asthma, hay fever and allergic sensitization compared to those consuming only milk purchased at a shop. The components in raw farm milk that were identified to be responsible for the effect on asthma were heat sensitive proteins of the whey fraction.

Raw milk consumption can nevertheless not be recommended as it may contain harmful micro-organisms. However, modern dairy processing might eventually be able to preserve the beneficial proteins and to provide an asthma protective and safe milk.

Key words: Allergic Diseases; Asthma; Atopy; Children; Farming; Hay fever; Microorganism; Farm Milk; Risk; Whey protein

The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (JACI) is the official scientific journal of the AAAAI, and is the most-cited journal in the field of allergy and clinical immunology.

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