As pre-adolescents go through puberty, their bodies change and grow quickly. Therefore, it is important for this age group, aged nine to 13, to consume dairy products to develop healthy bones and maintain health later in life. This is why Canada’s Food Guide recommends pre-adolescents eat three to four servings of milk products every day. However, most of them don’t reach this daily goal. This can lead to a deficiency in certain nutrients, such as calcium. University of Guelph researchers are discovering some of the reasons for low milk consumption among pre-adolescents and will create methods to increase consumption.

Department of human health and nutritional sciences professor Genevieve Newton and PhD student Megan Racey will be conducting youth focus groups to determine barriers to pre-teens consuming milk products. They then will develop methods to encourage the youth to increase their milk consumption.

Pre-adolescents are an important study group because they grow quickly, says Racey. There is also evidence dietary patterns—especially for drinking milk—established early in life persist into adulthood. Increasing milk consumption at this stage could have a positive impact for years to come, she adds.

“We want to stress to students how good dairy products are for them and where they can be included in their everyday life,” says Racey. “The goal is to teach kids both why and how to consume more dairy products. This will also help with sales.”

Dairy product consumption is decreasing among pre-adolescents, says Racey. Fad diets, milk not available at home, body issues and its relation to high-fat content in some dairy products, and peer pressure not to drink milk because it isn’t “cool” are some of the reasons why this age group is not drinking milk, says Racey. Limited knowledge about dairy products’ health benefits is also a barrier to consumption, she adds.

The researchers want to increase the youth’s knowledge about dairy products’ benefits by changing their attitude toward milk and milk products. They found school-based interactive participation, technology and taste-testing were effective in changing dietary habits. Racey and Newton will be using these methods to create new ways to target pre-adolescents’ dairy intake.

The first task may involve researchers collecting consumption barrier data using iclickers, a handheld device that lets users vote by pressing a button that corresponds to a presentation. They can then develop an interactive gaming iPad application based on the information collected.

“Students are routinely on their smartphones and iPads anyway,” says Racey. “So why not have an app they can download and play a game with a quiz at the end to make learning more interactive.”

Another task may involve the youth tasting various dairy products and role-playing to address some of the barriers to consumption.

The researchers hope these early methods will have long-term results and influence pre-adolescents to keep dairy top of mind.

“Eventually we hope these interventions will go Canada-wide to help increase dairy consumption and, ultimately, help the farmers,” says Racey.

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