

The white stuff

adapted from an article by Chelsea Whyte



- 1 27, there's a new milk in town. There are many, actually. The old alternatives — soy, rice, and coconut milk — are now joined on grocery shelves by alt-milks made from almonds, cashews, macadamia nuts, oats, peas, flax, hemp — the list goes on and on. You can even buy milk made from potatoes or bananas.
- 2 As you might expect for the latest food trend, these milks are mostly bought by millennials, or adults younger than 35. Manufacturers appeal to that generation's values by positioning the products as a healthy alternative, both for the body and the planet. But is that really true?
- 3 Nutritionally, it depends on which milk replacement you consider. Each type of alternative milk has its nutritional benefits and limitations. Any one of them can be considered healthy only when combined with a rounded diet, though the same can be said for dairy milk.
- 4 There are some alt-milks it makes little sense to produce in bulk. Rice milk is an option for those with dairy, nut, gluten and soy allergies, but it has far less protein than cow's milk and often has significant amounts of sweeteners added to improve the flavour. It is also one of the most environmentally costly alt-milks to produce. When rice paddies are flooded to stimulate plant growth, submerged biomass decomposes without oxygen, producing the potent greenhouse gas methane.
- 5 Of course, cows are notoriously bad for the environment as well. The carbon footprint of producing cow's milk varies from place to place, but in Western countries, it is typically around twice as big as that of making plant-based alternatives.
- 6 Carbon isn't the only environmental concern to consider. Nuts are notorious water sinks, with some requiring nearly as much water to produce as cow's milk. And producing one litre of soy milk requires 297 litres of water. That includes water that ends up in the milk itself, water that evaporates during production, water used to make the sugars and starches that flavour and stabilise the milk and water polluted by those processes.

7 30, alt-milks are friendlier to the environment than traditional dairy, but their growing popularity may cause problems. As more people jump on the bandwagon, manufacturers are starting to compete to introduce new flavours and new types of plant-based milks. This trend may cause unintended environmental harm.

8 If demand for coconut milk skyrockets, for example, it will become more profitable to grow coconut trees. That could lead to deforestation as farms expand. To avoid that, it is best to have 31. So maybe the proliferation of alt-milks is a saving grace.

9 All that said, sometimes the impacts on the food system may not be worth the end product, as with rice milk. Or take banana milk, which involves blending bananas, usually adding some sugar and spice for flavour, and straining the mixture. Then it must be stored and shipped. Is it worth it? Or is it best to just eat the banana?

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