Cheese

Cheese's immense popularity stems from its taste, versatility, many varieties and nutritional package.

What is Cheese?

Cheese is made by coagulating or curdling milk, stirring and heating the curd, draining off the whey (the watery part of milk), collecting and pressing the curd and, in some cases, aging. Cheese can be made from whole, 2% reduced-fat, 1% low-fat or fat-free (skim) milk. About one-third of all milk produced each year in the U.S. is used to make cheese.

Varieties

More than 300 different cheeses in the U.S. and 2000 in the world can be classified into eight categories:

- **Blue:** A characteristic of varieties that develop blue or green streaks of harmless, flavor-producing mold throughout the interior. Examples include Roquefort, Gorgonzola and Danish Blue.
- **Hard:** Well-aged, easily grated and primarily used in cooking. Examples include Parmesan, Romano and Asiago.
- **Pasta Filata:** Curds are heated and stretched or kneaded before being molded into shape. This type of cheese stretches when melted. Examples include Mozzarella and provolone.
- **Processed:** A blend of fresh and aged natural cheeses that have been shredded, mixed and heated. An emulsifier and salt are added, after which no further ripening occurs. American cheese is an example.
- **Semi-hard:** A classification of cheese based on texture. Examples include Cheddar, Colby, Edam and Gouda.
- **Semi-soft:** A wide variety of cheese that is made with whole milk and melts well when cooked. Examples include Monterey Jack, Fontina, Havarti and Muenster.
- **Soft and Fresh:** Have high moisture content and are typically made with the addition of lactic acid cultures. Examples include cottage cheese, cream cheese, Feta, Mascarpone, ricotta and queso blanco.
- **Soft-ripened:** A classification of cheese based on texture. Examples include Brie and Camembert.

Storing and Handling

- **Storing:** Cheese should be refrigerated at 40˚F or below in the original wrapper or container, transparent wrap, aluminum foil or plastic wrap. Generally, harder (lower moisture) cheeses keep longer than softer (higher moisture) cheeses.
- **Freezing:** Cheese can be frozen, but it may become mealy and crumbly when thawed. Thawed cheese is best used crumbled or shredded in salads, as toppings or in cooked dishes. For best results, use moisture-proof, airtight wrapping and freeze quickly. Thaw in the refrigerator and use as soon as possible after thawing.
- **Cooking:** Melt cheese at a low temperature for a short time. If cheese is heated at a temperature that is too high or for too long, it may become tough, rubbery or stringy. Some cheeses, like processed American, readily melt. Generally, low-fat cheeses are more suitable for serving cold than using in cooked dishes. For best results, shred, grate or cut cheese into small pieces for faster melting. Add cheese to sauces or as a topping at the end of the cooking time and heat until just melted.

Nutrition Facts

Cheese is a concentrated source of many of milk's nutrients. Considering that it takes about 10 pounds (5 quarts) of milk to make 1 pound of whole milk cheese, cheese is a nutrient-dense food. Cheese provides calories; high-quality protein; vitamins such as A, riboflavin (B2), and B12; and minerals such as calcium, potassium and phosphorus. The chart below gives the nutritional profile of some popular cheeses in common servings.

Commonly Asked Questions about Cheese

Does cheese have unique health benefits?

Consuming cheese immediately after meals or as a between-meal snack helps to reduce the risk of tooth decay. Certain cheeses – aged Cheddar, Swiss, blue, Monterey Jack, Brie, Gouda and processed American cheese – have been shown to help prevent tooth decay. Calcium, phosphorus and other components in cheese may contribute to this beneficial effect.

What about the fat in cheese?

Cheese accounts for only 9 percent of the total fat in the U.S. diet. Because there are so many different types of cheeses, most people can find an enjoyable variety that fits into their healthy eating plan. For individuals wishing to lower their calorie or fat intake, a variety of low-fat cheeses is available.

Doesn't cheese contain a lot of salt?

Salt (sodium) plays an important role in cheese-making as it controls moisture, texture, taste and food safety. Those who wish to limit sodium in their diets may consider choosing softer, less-aged cheeses because they require less salt than harder, longer-aged varieties. Other choices include lower sodium varieties of Colby Jack, provolone, Mozzarella or Cheddar.

Should I avoid cheese if I'm lactose intolerant?

Not necessarily. Most of the lactose (milk's sugar) in natural cheese is removed when the curds are separated from the whey in the cheese-making process. Aged cheeses like Cheddar generally have less lactose than fresh cheeses like cream cheese.

Is cheese made from unpasteurized milk safe?

Most cheeses made in the U.S. are from pasteurized milk. If unpasteurized milk is used, government regulations require that the cheese be aged for at least 60 days before it is sold. Regulatory agencies recognize aging of cheese as equal to pasteurization for eliminating pathogenic bacteria. Safe handling and storage of cheese are key to ensuring its safety and quality.

A Nutritional Look at Cheese

Food and serving size	Calories (Kcal)	Fat (g)	Protein (g)	Calcium (mg)
American, pasteurized process, 1 ounce	105	9	5	296
Cheddar, 1 ounce	114	9	7	204
Cottage, ½ cup, large or small curd	111	5	13	94
Cream cheese, 1 ounce	97	10	2	28
Mozzarella, part-skim (low moisture), 1 ounce	86	6	7	207

Source: USDA Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, October 2013.

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