



Diabetes  
New Zealand

# Healthy cheese choices

Do you wonder how cheese fits into your eating plan? Are you confused about the different cheeses and which ones are better for your health? **Alison Pask**, a New Zealand registered dietitian, gives us a guide to making healthy cheese choices.

## How many servings should we eat?

It is recommended that we eat 2-3 servings of reduced or low fat milk or milk products each day.



Cheese is a valuable source of calcium and protein. However, cheese can also be a hidden source of salt and fat, especially saturated fat.

- Choose low fat cheeses for everyday use
- Save higher fat cheeses for occasional use or when your recipe really needs the extra flavour a stronger tasting cheese will provide
- Occasional use of a higher fat cheese would be a 2cm cube no more than once a week.

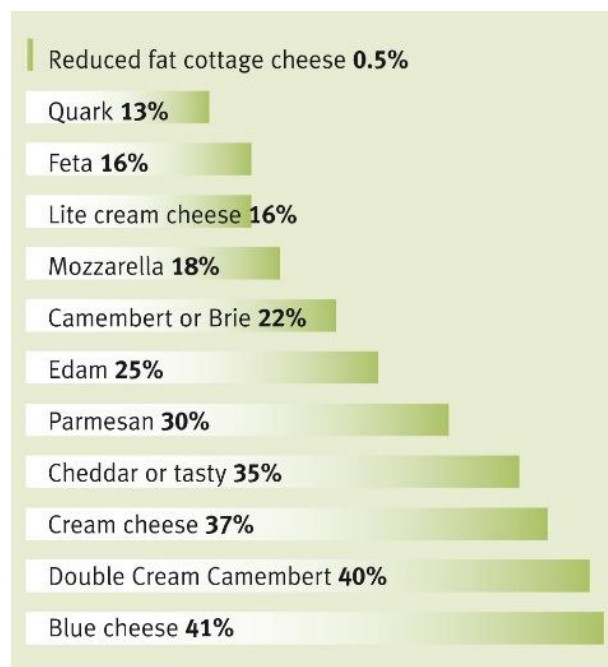
## What is the fat content of different cheeses?

The key nutritional concern when choosing cheese is the fat content. The fat content of cheese varies considerably.

Low fat cottage cheese can have a fat content of less than 1%, whereas some higher fat cheeses can be over 40% fat.

## Approximate fat content of cheeses

Always check the nutrition information panel as the fat content will vary depending on the brand.



## Soft cheeses

Generally softer cheeses are lower in fat, especially fresh cheeses like cottage, ricotta, quark (sometimes spelt quarg), feta and mozzarella. These cheeses are bland in flavour and are therefore useful to carry other flavours.

You can use ricotta and quark in both sweet and savoury dishes including quiches and cheesecakes. They also make great spreads on breads or bases for dips, especially when teamed with a vibrant flavour such as chilli or pesto. Use them when you need moisture, such as to bind stuffing for a chicken or for a topping on a baked potato.

The higher moisture content of fresh cheeses means they are better used in cold dishes. If you wish to add them to hot dishes such as casseroles, sauces or soups, remove the dish from the heat and add the cheese at the last minute to avoid curdling.



### Feta

- Preserved in brine with a crumbly texture
- Great in salads or accompanied with spinach wrapped in filo pastry.
- Tends to be high in salt - try rinsing off the brine before using.



### Mozzarella

- Has a stringy, stretchy texture
- A bland tasting cheese so is best used with flavoursome ingredients or in cooking such as a topping on pizza.



### Parmesan

- Strongly flavoured with a unique aroma
- The smell of fresh Parmesan is not as strong as powdered Parmesan
- You need only small quantities for maximum effect - if you use 10g of Parmesan cheese at 30% fat that gives you less fat in total than using 50g of Edam cheese at 25% fat.

#### 10 tips for healthy cheese choices

1. When cooking, use a stronger flavoured cheese - to get a good flavour you need a smaller amount than for a bland cheese
2. Grated cheese goes further than sliced cheese - use a micro-plane grater for best results as it grates very finely
3. As cheese is high in salt, avoid adding extra salt to your recipe
4. Crackers are usually high in fat - adding cheese increases the fat content even further
5. Low fat cheeses are good alternatives to full fat varieties - try mixing two different varieties together e.g. Edam for flavour and Mozzarella for texture
6. A cheese board and fresh fruit platter is a great option to take as a plate to an event
7. Try serving a cheese board and fresh fruit platter instead of dessert - take the cheese out of the fridge for about an hour before serving as this allows the flavour to develop
8. To avoid cheese going mouldy, buy smaller blocks or divide a larger block up and freeze
9. Grated cheese freezes well and thaws quickly so you can use it straight from the freezer
10. Eating a small amount of higher fat cheese occasionally may be a better choice than eating a larger amount of a lower fat, mild tasting cheese regularly.