

Creating Health & Nutrition Fact Sheets

Calcium Supplements



Calcium is an important mineral for growth and bone health. About 1.5 percent of our body weight is calcium. Most, about 99 percent, is found in our bones. People who do not eat or drink enough calcium-rich foods have a higher risk of osteoporosis as they age. Osteoporosis means “porous bones,” and these bones can break easily. This can cause hip fractures, broken wrists, and painful backs (from spinal disks collapsing).

More than half of all Americans do not get enough calcium in their

diets each day. The recommended daily amount of calcium for 19- to 50-year-olds is 1,000 milligrams (mg). Women aged 51 and older and men over 70 need 1,200 mg daily. To get this amount of calcium, one would need to eat 3 to 4 servings of dairy products or other calcium-rich foods each day. For those who are lactose intolerant or don't like dairy foods, calcium supplements may be needed to get enough calcium to reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

Here's some advice on calcium supplements:

- Calcium supplements are poorly absorbed by people who have too little stomach acid. This is more common

as we age. Stomach acid is produced when you eat, so take calcium carbonate supplements with food.

- Calcium and iron supplements compete

for absorption. If taking both, do not take them at the same time of day.

- Choose calcium supplements made of calcium carbonate or calcium citrate; avoid those containing bone meal or dolomite since they may contain mercury, arsenic, or lead, which are poisonous.

Tips Affecting Different Age Groups

- Children should be encouraged to find calcium-rich foods that appeal to them. If dairy foods are not eaten, look for *calcium-fortified* soy milk, juice, cereals, or snacks. Choose foods also fortified with vitamin D, which is needed for calcium to be absorbed.
- Adolescents need calcium the most. Don't let soda become the beverage for meals. Make calcium-rich foods part of the everyday food choices.
- Low-fat milk, cheese, and yogurt are good choices for all ages.
- If calcium-rich foods are not in your diet, keep bones strong with calcium supplements or multivitamins that contain calcium.

- Remember that calcium comes from both food and supplements. Calculate how much calcium you eat from foods and use supplements to get the rest. Too much calcium can affect kidney function in the elderly and may prevent other nutrients from being absorbed.
- Check to see if your supplement will dissolve. Drop a tablet into 6 ounces of vinegar, stirring often. After 30 minutes, a good supplement should break up and be at least 75 percent dissolved.

Tip

Choose calcium supplements made of calcium carbonate or calcium citrate; avoid supplements containing bone meal or dolomite, which may contain mercury, arsenic, or lead.

- Choose supplements with added vitamin D, which is needed for calcium absorption.
- Drink at least 8 ounces of water with your calcium supplement to help break it down.
- Calcium can also be supplemented with Tums, which is an antacid, and Viactiv, a chewy candy. Be cautious about overdosing.

Prepared by Frances Alloway, extension educator, Delaware County.

Sources: *Calcium Rich Eating, Lesson 4* by J. Lynne Brown, Penn State Extension.

Grosvenor, Mary, and Lori Smolin. *Nutrition, Everyday Choices*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2006.

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