

Patient Information

Calcium

What is calcium?

Calcium is the most abundant mineral in your body. It is very important for:

- bone health
- teeth
- nerve function
- muscles
- blood clotting.

If you do not get enough calcium in your diet you may be at risk for losing calcium from your bones, making them thinner and weaker. This condition is called osteoporosis.

How much calcium do I need?

How much calcium you need depends on your age.

The recommendations are:

GROUP

CALCIUM/DAY

Children 1 to 3	500 mg
Children 4 to 8	800 mg
Children 9 to 18	1300 mg
Adults 19 to 50	1000 mg
Adults over 50	1200 mg

* mg = milligrams

What are good sources of calcium?

Dairy products are one of the best sources of calcium. Calcium is in a variety of other foods, but if dairy products are not a part of your daily diet, it may be hard to get enough calcium from the foods you eat. The following table shows approximate amounts of calcium in various food sources for this nutrient.

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Dairy Foods

FOOD	SERVING SIZE	MG CALCIUM
Plain yogurt, low fat/fat free	1 cup	415 to 450
Fruit yogurt, low fat/fat free	1 cup	350
Milk (fat-free, low-fat, whole)	1 cup	300
Frozen yogurt (fat-free, low-fat, whole)	1 cup	210
Reduced-fat cheddar cheese	1 oz	120
American cheese	2 oz	323
Swiss cheese	1.5 oz	336
Cheddar cheese	1.5 oz	307
Mozzarella, part-skim	1.5 oz	311
Ricotta cheese, part skim	1/2 cup	355
Cottage cheese, reduced fat	1/2 cup	75
Calcium-fortified cottage cheese	1/2 cup	300
Cheese pizza	1 slice	220

Nondairy Foods

FOOD	SERVING SIZE	MG CALCIUM
Calcium-fortified orange juice	1 cup	300
Corn tortillas (lime treated)	3	130
Waffle, 7-inch round	1	180
Pancakes, 4-inch round	2	115
Beans, dried (cooked)	1 cup	90
Soybeans (cooked)	1/2 cup	90
Tofu (processed with calcium sulfate)	1/2 cup	253
Soy drink (calcium-fortified)	1 cup	370
Salmon with small bones	3 oz	180
Broccoli (raw)	1 cup	90
Almonds	4 oz	80
Calcium-fortified cereal	1 oz	235 to 1043
Chinese cabbage, raw	1 cup	74
Turnip greens boiled	1/2 cup	99
Kale, cooked	1 cup	94

Calcium content and availability will vary depending on the type of food, fat content processing, and brand. The calcium in some of the nondairy choices, such as vegetables,

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beans, and soy, is not absorbed as well as the calcium in dairy products. Although foods fortified with calcium make it easier to meet daily calcium needs, it still can be hard for your body to absorb enough calcium if dairy foods are not a part of your diet. If possible, get your calcium from a variety of foods.

Do I need a calcium supplement?

If you can get enough calcium in your diet, you do not need to take calcium supplements. If you cannot have milk products in your diet, or they must be limited, ask your healthcare provider or dietitian if you should take a calcium supplement.

You are more likely to need a supplement if you:

- Have digestive problems or other types of reactions if you drink or eat dairy products (such as lactose intolerance or milk allergy).
- Have osteoporosis or osteopenia (decreased bone density).
- Are pregnant or breast-feeding.
- Are a vegan vegetarian (don't eat any animal products).
- Do not eat a healthy diet.
- Are a postmenopausal woman.

Which calcium supplement should I take?

There are many calcium preparations and strengths. Choosing one can be confusing. The most common products are calcium carbonate and calcium citrate. Look for familiar brand-name products that have the USP (United States Pharmacopeia) symbol on the label. These products have been tested for adequate absorption by the body.

Calcium carbonate is best absorbed with a meal. Calcium citrate can be taken on a full or empty stomach. Calcium citrate may be a better choice for older adults or younger people who have low levels of stomach acid.

Look at how much elemental calcium is in the supplement. The less elemental calcium per pill, the more pills you will have to take to meet your needs. If you want to take just 2 calcium pills a day, you need to choose a product that

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contains 500 to 600 mg of elemental calcium. Calcium, whether in food or supplements, is best absorbed if taken several times a day, in amounts of 500 mg or less.

Calcium phosphate, lactate, and gluconate are also well absorbed. However, the calcium content of these supplements is low per pill, so you need several pills a day to meet your needs.

What happens if I don't get enough calcium?

If you do not get enough calcium, you may have muscle cramps in your hands and feet. You may also develop osteoporosis, which may result in:

- a gradual loss of height
- humping of the back
- bones that break easily
- serious fractures if you fall.

Does anything affect the body's ability to absorb calcium?

Vitamin D increases calcium absorption.

Some medicines, such as tetracycline (an antibiotic) and antacids that contain aluminum, can make it harder for your body to absorb calcium.

How can I take care of myself?

- Eat more calcium-rich food: dairy products, green leafy vegetables, citrus fruit, and sardines. Add cheese to salads and entrees and milk to casseroles and soups. If you are trying to cut back on fat, use only nonfat milk and fat-free and reduced-fat cheese.
- Some people cannot digest most dairy products because their bodies lack the enzyme lactase needed to break down milk sugar (lactose). This problem is called lactose intolerance. If you are lactose intolerant, you can buy nonprescription products, such as Lactaid or Dairy Ease. These products come in pill form and contain lactase to help you digest dairy products.

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- Get plenty of exercise. Walk a mile a day if you can. Your body needs exercise to help it use the calcium in your diet to strengthen your bones.
- Take calcium supplements if you are advised to do so.

[Related Topics]

Lactose Intolerance
Osteoporosis

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