

Calcium

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Calcium is perhaps the most well-known and essential nutrient when it comes to bone health. Building strong bones is like building a healthy balance in your “calcium bank account.” Bones are living tissue and constantly in a state of turn-over, making calcium deposits and withdrawals daily.

Bones don’t come with a lifetime guarantee. They need continuous maintenance or they can weaken and break. If your daily intake of calcium is low, your body will take calcium from your bones to keep blood calcium at normal levels.

To meet calcium needs and reap the benefits of a lifetime of healthy bones:

- Consume three servings of dairy or calcium-fortified soy versions, such as low-fat or fat-free milk, soymilk or yogurt, every day.
- Choose leafy green vegetables, calcium-fortified tofu, canned sardines and salmon with soft bones for additional calcium sources.
- When selecting 100% fruit juices and ready-to-eat cereals, choose ones fortified with calcium.
- Follow an overall healthy eating plan using MyPlate as a guide (www.myplate.gov).
- Be physically active with weight-bearing activities such as running, dancing or weight training.

Focus on Food First

Registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) recommend food as the primary source of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients, such as calcium.

When shopping, read the Nutrition Facts Label and select foods that contain 10% or more of the Daily Value for calcium. Foods that are naturally high or fortified with calcium may be labeled as “calcium-rich” or “excellent source of calcium.”

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Looking for a quick way to boost your calcium intake? Try these easy tips:

- Drink an 8-ounce glass of low-fat milk or a calcium-fortified beverage, like soymilk, with your meals. Fat-free and low-fat milk have a similar amount of calcium as whole milk.
- Make oatmeal with milk or a calcium-fortified beverage instead of water.
- Eat 1 cup of low-fat or fat-free yogurt with fruit for breakfast or a snack.
- Top a baked potato with steamed broccoli and shredded low-fat or fat-free cheese. For additional calcium, substitute plain Greek yogurt for sour cream.
- Add calcium-rich greens (like collard greens, turnip greens or kale) to meals.
- Enjoy ½ cup cooked soybeans or 5 dried figs for a snack.
- Make a breakfast shake by blending milk or a calcium-fortified beverage with fruit and a green, like spinach.
- Enjoy calcium-fortified tofu as a plant-based protein option. Other plant-based choices that provide protein and calcium include soybeans, almond butter and tempeh.

How Well is Calcium Absorbed?

Calcium is absorbed best if your intake of calcium-rich foods is spread out during the day. An RDN can help you choose foods or a combination of foods and a supplement to meet your individual calcium needs, while keeping in mind calcium intake should not exceed 2,500 milligrams per day for adults between ages 19 and 50. This amount is reduced to 2,000 milligrams per day for adults over 51.

More Tips for Bone Health

While choosing calcium-rich foods and participating in weight bearing activities are key to bone health, there are a few other tips to keep in mind:

- Avoid smoking and excessive alcohol intake.
- Ask your physician if you need a bone density test based on your risk factors for osteoporosis or if you are a woman over 50.
- If you need a calcium supplement, choose one that also contains vitamin D, which will aid in calcium's absorption.
- If you're not sure if your eating habits are meeting your nutritional needs, consider seeing an RDN for individual guidance and recommendations.