

Your Calcium Needs and How to Get Enough Calcium



Allina Health

Why Calcium is Important

Calcium is a mineral that helps build and protect your bones throughout your life. Getting the right amount of calcium in your diet each day will help you achieve and maintain dense (thick) bone mass and reduce bone loss in later years.

Without enough calcium you may be at risk for osteoporosis, a disease that causes loss of bone density. Bones become thin and brittle to the point that they break easily.

A diet high in calcium has also been linked to lower risks for heart disease, high blood pressure and colon cancer.

How Much Calcium Do You Need

Calcium needs vary, depending on age*:

- birth to 6 months: 210 mg a day
- 7 to 12 months: 270 mg a day
- 1 to 3 years: 500 mg a day
- 4 to 8 years: 800 mg a day
- 9 to 18 years: 1,300 mg a day
- 19 to 50 years: 1,000 mg a day
- older than 50: 1,200 to 1,500 mg a day
- pregnant or lactating women: 1,200 mg a day.

The best way to get calcium is to eat foods high in calcium.

These foods include:

- dairy products (milk, cheeses, yogurt)
- canned salmon (with bones)
- tofu
- calcium-fortified juices, cereals and breads.

** National Institutes of Health and the National Osteoporosis Foundation*

Vitamin D and Calcium

Your body needs vitamin D to absorb calcium. Your body makes vitamin D when you are exposed to sunlight. This can be difficult between late fall and early spring when sunlight isn't as strong as it is in the summer. You can spend some time in the sun each day, but be sure to wear an SPF 15 or higher sunscreen if you plan to be in the sun for more than 15 minutes.

As you get older, your skin is not as good at making vitamin D as it was when you were younger. The color of your skin also affects how much vitamin D your skin makes. The lighter your skin, the more vitamin D you make.

You need at least 1,000 to 2,000 IU of vitamin D each day. You can get vitamin D from foods such as fortified milk and fortified cereals, egg yolks, saltwater fish and liver. One glass of milk has 100 IU of vitamin D. If you are concerned about your vitamin D levels, talk with your health care provider or dietitian.

Calcium Supplements

If your diet is low in calcium, you may need to take a supplement. You can buy calcium supplements at major grocery stores, discount stores, pharmacies and health food stores.

- A serving of food rich in calcium has 250 to 350 mg of calcium. Examples include 8 ounces of milk or fortified juice, 3 ½ ounces of canned salmon (with bones), 4 ounces of tofu or 6 to 8 ounces of yogurt.
- Look for a supplement that has no more than 500 mg “elemental calcium” per dose. This is the maximum amount your body can absorb. If you need to take more than 500 mg a day, take one 500 mg pill two to three times each day with meals.
- There can be side effects from getting too much calcium. If you take more than 2,500 mg of calcium a day, you may be at a greater risk for kidney stones or other problems. If you are not sure how much calcium is right for you, talk with your health care provider or registered dietitian.

Choosing a calcium supplement

There are several forms of calcium supplements on the market. The following chart explains the differences between them.

| Supplement/names | About this type |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| calcium citrate or calcium citrate malate ■ Citrical® | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This is the best absorbed form of calcium. Take it with food or in between meals. ■ This is more expensive than calcium carbonate. You may need to take more to get the same amount as in a calcium carbonate. ■ This is best for people older than age 50 and for people who have gastric bypass surgery. |
| calcium carbonate ■ Tums® ■ Caltrate® ■ Viactiv® Soft Calcium Chews ■ Os-Cal® ■ Nature Made® | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This is absorbed well. Take it with meals. ■ This form is less expensive than calcium citrate. ■ This is the most common type of calcium supplement. |
| calcium glutonate, calcium lactate, calcium phosphate, and bone meal (made from animal bones) ■ Posture-D Calcium® ■ bone meal ■ calcium glutonate ■ Calcium Lactate Caps® | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This is more expensive than calcium carbonate. You may need to take more to get the same amount as in a calcium carbonate. ■ This is not absorbed well. Take it with meals. ■ This is often not recommended over other types of calcium supplements. |

What Can Affect Calcium Absorption

The following can affect how well your body absorbs calcium.

- **Age**

As you get older your body absorbs calcium less efficiently as it did when you were younger.

- **Need**

When your need for calcium is high your body absorbs more calcium.

- **Amount taken**

The more calcium you take at one time, the less your body absorbs.

- **Absorption time**

The longer calcium stays in your intestines, the better it is absorbed. Take supplements with food, not on an empty stomach because the food slows down the rate at which the calcium moves through your intestines.

- **Stomach acid**

Stomach acid helps dissolve the supplement and release the calcium. Your body makes less stomach acid as you age.

- **Iron supplements**

Calcium supplements can decrease the amount of iron your body absorbs. If you take an iron supplement (including a multivitamin with iron) and a calcium supplement, take them a few hours apart.

- **Caffeine**

Avoid taking supplements with beverages containing caffeine (coffee, tea, pop). Limit your caffeinated beverages to two or fewer each day.

Whom To Call With Questions

If you have any questions or concerns about the calcium in your diet, or about calcium supplements, talk with your health care provider or registered dietitian.



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