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Calcium—The fussy nutrient

HOW TO GET THE TYPE, TIMING AND AMOUNT RIGHT TO PREVENT BOTH OSTEOPOROSIS AND HEART DISEASE

By Mary Bamford, Registered Dietitian

Calcium is a fussy nutrient in many ways.

Calcium is an important nutrient for bone health and heart health. There are four things to keep in mind with this fussy mineral:

1. you need to consume it at every meal,
2. there is a fine line between too much and too little,
3. there are a limited number of foods that are good sources of calcium,
4. recent research suggests supplements may cause heart attacks.

First, despite unlimited storage of calcium in our bones, you need a continuous fresh supply through your diet. The calcium in bones is really only emergency storage and you need to consume a quarter to a third of your calcium needs at each meal to reduce your risk of osteoporosis.

That's because using that stored calcium has a steep price—bones that gradually become fragile and break.

One in four women over the age of 50 has osteoporosis and at least one in eight men over 50 also has the disease.

Second, there is a very fine line between too much and too little. Depending on your age and gender, **you need at least 1000 to 1200 mg per day, but must stay below 2000 mg per day if you are over 50** (or stay below 2500 mg per day if you are 19-50).



In addition to a daily maximum, it is **important to keep calcium intake below 500-600 mg from all sources at a single meal.** Many people exceed this by getting all their calcium at one meal, often at breakfast. They get 300 mg from milk in their cereal, 200 mg from a multivitamin and 300-600 mg from a calcium supplement.

Third, there are a limited number of foods that are good sources of calcium.

The absorption of calcium is generally low and highly variable. You absorb about 32% of the calcium in milk and dairy products, 5% of the calcium in spinach and 61% of the calcium in broccoli. Therefore, lists that let you know the milligrams of calcium in a food are not fully helpful. And, despite the high absorption of calcium from broccoli, it still takes 2 ½ cups of broccoli to provide the same amount of absorbable calcium as 1 cup of milk (and it takes more than 8 cups of spinach!).

Fourth, high single dose intake of calcium, especially from supplements, is linked to kidney stones and now heart attacks. Recent studies are finding calcium supplementation reduces the risk of osteoporosis by 10 % while however can increase the risk of heart disease by 25%.

A simple solution for optimal calcium intake: Aim to get 200 to 300 mg of calcium from calcium-rich foods at each meal.

A simple solution for your calcium intake

Aim to get 200 to 300 mg of calcium from calcium-rich foods at each meal. On a food label that is 20% to 30% of Recommended Daily Value. Plan to get the rest of your calcium from vegetables, nuts, seeds and legumes.

If you use a calcium supplement to augment the calcium you get from food, choose one with 300 mg of elemental calcium or less. This strategy will help you maintain an appropriate level of calcium with less risk of increasing your risk of heart disease.

Examples of Calcium-Rich Foods

Calcium-rich foods include milk products, canned fish with bones, a few vegetables (listed below), calcium set tofu, calcium fortified milks and juices.

Calcium-rich Food	Portion Size Equivalent to calcium in 1 cup of milk (300 mg total or 100 mg absorbable)
Milk (cow, goat, sheep, fortified soy)	1 cup
Almond Milk	2 cups
Plain Yogurt	¾ cup (175 grams)
Cheddar Cheese	42 grams (1.5 ounces)
Bok Choy	1 ¼ cup
Chinese Mustard Greens	2/3 cup
Kale	1 ½ cups
Calcium-set tofu	150 grams
Canned sardines with bones	90 grams (3 ounces)
Canned salmon with bones	120 grams (4 ounces)
Caviar, black and red	120 grams (4 ounces)
Anchovies, canned	120 grams (4 ounces)

I invite you to consult me for other nutrition choices to enjoy your best bone and heart health.

