

Calcium: Is Your Child Getting Enough?

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Most older children and adolescents in the United States currently do not achieve the recommended intake of calcium.

Maintaining adequate calcium intake during childhood and adolescence is necessary for the development of peak bone mass, which is important in reducing the risk of fractures and osteoporosis later in life. Optimal calcium intake is especially relevant during adolescence, when most bone mineral build-up occurs.

A well-rounded diet including low-fat dairy products, fruits, and vegetables and appropriate physical activity are important for achieving good bone health. Establishing these practices in childhood is important so that they will be followed throughout the adult life.

Where is Calcium Found In The Body?

About 99% of total body calcium is found in the skeleton. The primary need for calcium in the diet is for building strong bones. The important calcium-regulating hormones - hormones essential for good bone health - include parathyroid hormone, calcitonin, and Vitamin D.

How Does Vitamin D Play A Role?

Calcium is absorbed in the intestine. This process requires adequate Vitamin D. Many children and adults have insufficient amounts of this important vitamin in their body.

Infants, children and adolescents all need a minimum of 400 I U (International units) of Vitamin D per day for good bone health. During the months of October through May, above 35 degrees north latitude (which includes Oregon), the angle of the sun is not sufficient for our bodies to make adequate Vitamin D, even with regular sun exposure. Therefore, regular daily consumption of foods that are good sources of Vitamin D is important. Taking a daily multi-vitamin during these months is a terrific idea.

What Is The Most Important Age For Getting Enough Calcium?

Adolescence, hands down. During a 3- to 4-year period during adolescence (usually 11 to 14 years for girls, 13 to 16 years for boys), 40% of total lifetime bone mass is accumulated. Therefore it is crucial that pre-teens and young teens are getting regular sources of dietary calcium for this entire period.

Not getting enough calcium during these important years not only causes weak bones later in life, it also increases the risk and number of fractures during adolescence!

What Are Some Good Dietary Sources of Calcium?

Plain Yogurt (1 cup) 415mg

Sardines (3 oz.) 375mg

Milk (1 cup) 300 mg

Flavored Yogurt (1 cup) 345mg

Ricotta Cheese (1/2 cup) 340mg

Cheese (Swiss, Cheddar...1 oz.) 275mg

Cheese (American, 1 oz.) 175mg
Instant Oatmeal (1 pkg.) 150mg
Cheese (Nonfat Cream, 1 oz.) 100mg
Turnip Greens (1/2 cup) 100mg
Shelled Almonds (1 oz.) 100mg
Cottage Cheese (1/2 cup) 70mg
Corn Tortilla (1 medium) 50mg
Dates, Raisins (1/4 cup) 25mg
Soy Milk (1 cup) 25mg
Carrot (1 raw) 25mg

Calcium-Set Tofu (1/2 cup) 150mg
Pudding, Custard (1/2 cup) 150mg
White Beans (1/2 cup) 100mg
Bok Choy (1/2 cup) 100mg
Ice Cream (1/2 cup) 90mg
Broccoli (1/2 cup) 50mg
Orange (1 whole) 50mg
Whole Wheat Bread (1 slice) 25mg
Egg (1 large) 25mg

** Remember that calcium intakes on food labels are indicated as a percentage of the "daily value" in each serving. This daily value is currently set at 100mg per day, which is the adult requirement up to 50 years of age.

How Much Calcium Does My Child Need Daily?

It's really hard to eat TOO MUCH calcium so consider the following numbers to be daily MINIMUMS: infants 200-400 milligrams daily, toddlers 400-600mg daily, children 800mg daily, adolescents 1200-1400mg daily.

Remember that a calcium-rich diet can still be a low-fat diet. There are many good-tasting non- and low-fat milks, cheese, yogurts, and ice creams available.

What If My Child Is Lactose-Intolerant?

There are plenty of non-dairy choices as sources of calcium, though it will be more difficult for the lactose-intolerant (or dairy allergic) child to meet their daily minimum calcium intake.

Fermented dairy products, such as yogurts and hard, aged cheeses, are more easily tolerated for children who are lactose-intolerant. Drinking 6 ounces or less of milk at a serving seldom causes symptoms. Lactaid™ milk is available, in which the lactose has already been broken down. Lactaid™ chewable tablets and drops are available, and can ease or eliminate symptoms of lactose intolerance if taken with dairy products. Generic forms are also available.

Calcium-fortified soy milk and orange juice, and select fortified breakfast cereals, may also be used as good calcium sources. Calcium carbonate supplements (available in 300mg and 600mg per tablet forms) are also available, and are good sources of calcium for the child or teen who cannot or will not consume adequate amounts of calcium from the diet.

What Else Is Important For Good Bone Health?

Exercise, exercise, exercise. Regular weight-bearing exercise, especially during adolescence, gives long-lasting benefits for good bone health. Sedentary, screen-bound teens are much more likely to have weaker bones, and are more susceptible to fractures and achiness with activity.