

Calcium

What is calcium?

Calcium is the most abundant mineral in your body.

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 and whether you are male or female.

The recommendations are:

GROUP	MG CALCIUM/DAY
Children	800
Teenagers and young adults up to 24 years	1200-1500
Premenopausal women 25 to 50 years	1000
Women 25 to 50 years	1000
Pregnant and breast-feeding women	1200 - 1500
Women over 50 years (postmenopausal)	
Taking estrogen	1000
Not taking estrogen	1500
Women over 65 years	1500
Men 25 to 65 years	1000
Men over 65 years	1500

What are good sources of calcium?

Dairy products are one of the best sources of calcium. Calcium may also be found in a variety of other foods, as listed in the following table.

FOOD (APPROXIMATE)	SERVING SIZE	MG CALCIUM
Milk, whole, 2%, 1%, or skim	8 oz	300
Yogurt	8 oz	300
Cheddar cheese	1 oz	200
Ice cream	1/2 cup	100
Frozen yogurt	1/2 cup	100
Cottage cheese	1/2 cup	90
Tofu, firm	4 oz	250
Soy milk, unfortified	8 oz	80
Greens (collard, kale, mustard)	1/2 cup	80-150
Red beans, chickpeas	3/4 cup	60
Sardines (with bones)	3 oz	350
Salmon, canned (with bones)	3 oz	180

Molasses, blackstrap	1 tablespoon	125
Corn tortillas	2	90
Seaweed, dry	1/2 cup	100

Many brands of orange juice, cereal, and bread are fortified with extra calcium. Check the labels.

Do I need a calcium supplement?

If you can get enough calcium in your diet, you do not need to take calcium supplements. Dairy products are the easiest source of calcium. It is hard to get enough calcium if these products are not a part of your diet.

Some people cannot digest most dairy products because their bodies lack the enzyme needed to break down milk sugar (lactose). They must follow a lactose-free diet. There are nonprescription products to help such people digest dairy products. You can ask your health care provider, nutritionist, or pharmacist about these products.

If you do need calcium supplements, many types are available. The calcium is usually combined with carbonate, citrate, lactate, gluconate, or phosphate. The body absorbs all of these forms of calcium equally well. However, avoid bone meal, dolomite, and oyster shell calcium because they may contain lead or other toxic metals. Check labels to see how much "essential calcium" is in each pill.

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?

The following can make it harder for your body to absorb calcium:

- caffeine
- too much dietary fiber
- phosphates (in soft drinks)
- some medicines, such as tetracycline (an antibiotic) and antacids that contain aluminum.

Vitamin D increases calcium absorption.

How can I take care of myself?

- If you are losing height or getting a hump in your back, see your health care provider.
- If you are diagnosed with osteoporosis, follow your health care provider's treatment recommendations.
- Take calcium supplements if you are advised to do so.
- Eat more calcium-rich food: dairy products, green leafy vegetables, citrus fruit, and sardines.
- If you do not have a problem with digesting dairy products, 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.
- 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.