

Healthy Eating: Calcium¹

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What is calcium?



Calcium is the major mineral found in our bones and teeth. We need calcium for proper functioning of muscles and nerves. Calcium also helps our blood to clot.

Calcium is a critical nutrient at every stage of life. We are best able to put calcium into our bones to make them strong early in life. Then, as we get older, it's important to get enough calcium to avoid bone loss. Vitamin D helps us absorb calcium, so it is also important to get enough of this nutrient throughout our lives.



Many older people do **not** get enough calcium from the foods they eat. This can lead to the bone disease osteoporosis. People with osteoporosis are at high risk of having a bone fracture.

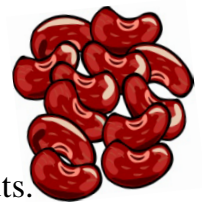
What foods contain calcium?

In the U.S., the major sources of calcium for many people are dairy foods. This includes milk, yogurt, cheese, and ice cream. For heart health, low-fat or fat-free versions of dairy foods are recommended.



Many green vegetables are good calcium sources too. Kale, romaine lettuce, and broccoli all provide calcium. Spinach contains many nutrients, including calcium, but the oxalic acid in this green vegetable keeps calcium from getting into our bodies.

Other calcium sources are legumes (kidney beans, pinto beans, black beans, lentils), tofu (processed with calcium), and nuts.



**Many foods are now fortified with calcium.
You can even get calcium in orange juice!**

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What happens if I don't get enough calcium?

Because it is needed for so many body functions, our bodies have hormones that control our blood calcium levels. When you don't get enough calcium, parathyroid hormone (PTH) causes calcium to be taken from bones to keep blood levels normal.

What are Hormones?

Hormones are chemical messengers. They are made in one part of the body and then travel to another organ or tissue. Once there, the hormones affect specific body processes.



Over time, if you don't get enough calcium, your bones will begin to become porous and weak. As your bone loss becomes severe, you may develop the bone disease called osteoporosis. Your doctor can order a bone density test to confirm that you have osteoporosis.

How much calcium do I need?

The recommended intake for men and women 51 years and older is 1,200 milligrams of calcium a day. This is more than most people get from the foods they eat. Some people may need more calcium to decrease their risk of osteoporosis. Check with your health care provider to see how much calcium you should get each day.



To get the calcium you need, eat foods that are naturally high in calcium, as well as foods that have calcium added. If you aren't getting enough of this mineral from foods, you can take calcium supplements.

Table 1. Calcium content of select foods

Amount	Food	Calcium mg/serving*
1 cup	Yogurt, low-fat, fruit	345
1 cup	Milk, low-fat	305
½ cup	Tofu, raw, firm	250
¾ cup	Orange juice with calcium	200
1½ ounces	Cheddar cheese, low-fat	120
½ cup	Kale, frozen, cooked	90
½ cup	Black beans, cooked	50
½ cup	Broccoli, cooked	50
½ cup	Kidney beans, cooked	30

*mg=milligrams

Where can I get more, reliable information?

The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your county Extension office may have more written information and nutrition classes for you to attend. Also, a registered dietitian (RD) can provide reliable information to you.

Call your Area Agency on Aging for information about meal programs that may be offered in your area.

Reliable nutrition information may be found on the Internet at the following sites:

- <http://www.nutrition.gov/>
- <http://www.nof.org/prevention>
- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/osteoporosis.html>
- <http://mypyramid.gov>