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Calcium and Vitamin D Requirements

Calcium is needed to regulate heart function, conduct nerve impulses, secrete hormones and clot blood. If the body does not get enough calcium daily, it will “steal” from the bones.

Postmenopausal women need 1200 mg a day (premenopausal women need 1000 mg a day).

Food is the best source of calcium, containing trace minerals to help absorption. Magnesium and phosphorus are adequate in most diets. A well balanced diet is critical to bone health. Most women consume about half the calcium they need.

What to look for in a Calcium supplement

Calcium exists in nature only in combination with other substances. These substances are called *compounds*. Several different calcium compounds are used in supplements, including:

- calcium carbonate
- calcium phosphate
- calcium citrate

These compounds contain different amounts of *elemental calcium*, which is the actual amount of calcium in the supplement. It is important to read the label carefully to determine how much elemental calcium is in the supplement and how many doses or pills to take.

Calcium supplements are available without a prescription in a wide range of preparations and strengths, which can make selecting one a confusing experience. Many people ask which calcium supplement they should take. The “best” supplement is the one that meets your needs. *Ask yourself these questions:*

- How well does my body tolerate this kind of supplement? Does it cause any side effects (like gas or constipation)? If so, you may want to try another kind or a different brand. Calcium phosphate is usually easier to tolerate, but harder to find. Taking calcium with 8 ounces of water usually avoids constipation.
- Is this kind of supplement convenient? Can I remember to take it as often as recommended each day? Can I chew or swallow it?

Other Important Things to Consider

Purity: Look for labels that state “purified” or have the USP (United States Pharmacopeia) symbol. Avoid calcium from unrefined oyster shell, bone meal, or dolomite without the USP symbol, because it may contain high levels of lead, mercury and other toxic metals.

Absorbability: Most brand-name calcium products are absorbed easily in the body. Chewable and liquid calcium supplements dissolve well because they are broken down before they enter the stomach. Calcium cannot be absorbed without Vitamin D. Calcium, whether from food or supplements, is absorbed best by the body when it is taken several times a day in amounts of 500 mg or less, but taking it all at once is better than not taking it at all. Calcium carbonate is absorbed best when taken with food. Calcium citrate can be taken anytime.

Calcium Interactions: Calcium supplements may reduce the absorption of the antibiotic tetracycline. Calcium also interferes with iron absorption. You should not take a calcium supplement at the same time as an iron supplement.

The Best Sources of Calcium from Food

DAIRY	Amount	Calcium in mg
Milk, nonfat (powdered)	¼ cup	377
Milk, skim, Lactaid, whole, 1% - 2%	1 cup	300
Yogurt, plain (lowfat)	1 cup	415
Yogurt, fruit flavored (lowfat)	1 cup	314
Cheese, Swiss	1 ounce	272
Cheese, Monterey Jack	1 ounce	212
Cheese, Mozzarella (low moisture, part skim)	1 ounce	207
Cheese, Cheddar	1 ounce	204
Cheese, Parmesan (grated)	1 tablespoon	69
Cottage Cheese	½ cup	63
Ice Cream	½ cup	84
Fruits and Vegetables	Amount	Calcium in mg
Collards, cooked from frozen	½ cup	179
Turnip greens, cooked from frozen	½ cup	125
Kale, cooked from frozen	½ cup	90
Broccoli	½ cup	47
Chard, cooked	½ cup	51
Orange	1 medium	52
Protein	Amount	Calcium in mg
Sardines (canned with bones)	3 ounces	322
Salmon, pink (canned with bones)	3 ounces	181
Tofu, firm (processed with calcium)	½ cup	258
Almonds, shelled	1 ounce	80
Soybeans, cooked	½ cup	88
Dried beans, cooked (lima, navy, kidney)	½ cup	25-64
Calcium-Fortified Foods		Check labels