

Facts about Calcium¹

L. B. Bobroff²

Why do we need calcium?

Calcium is the major mineral found in our bones and teeth. Along with phosphorus and other nutrients, calcium builds the hard structure that makes bones and teeth strong. We also need calcium for proper muscle and nerve function, blood clotting, and other body processes. These functions are so critical that calcium is taken from the bones to maintain blood calcium if dietary calcium is inadequate.

What happens if we don't get enough calcium?

We need calcium all through our lives to support our bones and teeth, and other body functions. We build most of the structure of our bones before we reach 30 years of age. If we don't get enough calcium to make bones strong when we're young, we will be at risk for osteoporosis as we get older.

Osteoporosis is a condition in which bones are porous and weak. People with osteoporosis have a high risk of bone fractures. Hip fractures often result in loss of independence, so keeping bones strong is an important health goal.

How do I know if I am at risk for osteoporosis?

You may be at a higher risk for osteoporosis if you:

- are white or Asian;
- are small boned and thin;
- have a family history of osteoporosis;



Figure 1. For many Americans, dairy foods are the main sources of dietary calcium. Low-fat (1%) and fat-free dairy foods are recommended to limit intake of saturated fat and cholesterol. Credits: Carla Peroni, <http://bit.ly/uwgzT> ; LotusHead, <http://bit.ly/AxQAg>

1. La versión en español de este documento es Datos Sobre el Calcio (FCS8703Span). This document is FCS8703, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published: July 2001. Revised March 2012. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Linda B. Bobroff, PhD, RD, LD/N, professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

- are a post-menopausal woman and don't take estrogen; or
- take certain medications; ask a pharmacist for more information.

How much calcium do we need?

The following table lists recommended daily intakes of calcium:

Life Stage	Calcium (mg/day)
Children, ages 1-3	700
Children, ages 4-8	1,000
Youth, ages 9-18	1,300
Men, ages 19-70	1,000
Men, 70+	1,200
Women, ages 19-50	1,000
Women, ages 51+	1,200
Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding	
Ages 14-18	1,300
Ages 19-50	1,000
mg = milligrams	

How can we get enough calcium?

For many Americans, dairy foods are the main sources of dietary calcium. Low-fat (1%) and fat-free dairy foods are recommended to limit intake of saturated fat and cholesterol. Lactose-free milk and yogurt can be helpful for people who have trouble digesting lactose (the sugar in milk), but they often are able to drink small amounts of



Figure 2. People who do not eat dairy foods can choose dark leafy greens, canned sardines and salmon, and calcium-fortified foods to get the calcium they need.

Credits: InPraiseofSardines, CC 2.0 <http://bit.ly/AtqvDD>



Figure 3. Salmon is another non-dairy food that contains calcium. These salmon croquettes are made from canned salmon including the crushed bones, which are an excellent source of calcium.

Credits: jypsygen, CC 2.0 <http://bit.ly/wW9lBB>

milk with no ill effects. Since cheese contains no lactose, it can be eaten by persons with lactose intolerance as well.

People who do not eat dairy foods may have a hard time getting the calcium they need. Non-dairy food sources of calcium include calcium-fortified soy beverages, orange juice, and grains. Deep green leafy vegetables like kale, collards, and broccoli, and some types of tofu are also sources of calcium. Here are some foods and the amount of calcium they contain:

Food	Calcium (mg/serving)
Tofu, raw, firm, 2 ounces*	110
Yogurt, low-fat, fruit, 1 cup	200
Milk, low-fat (1%), 1 cup	300
Fortified soy beverage, 1 cup	250
Fortified orange juice, ¾ cup	150
Cheddar cheese, 50% less fat, 1 ounce	200
Cottage cheese, 1%, 1 cup	140
Collard greens, cooked and drained, ½ cup	175
Kale, cooked and drained, ½ cup	50
Broccoli, cooked and drained, ½ cup	30
Sardines, canned in oil, with bones, 3 ounces	325
mg = milligrams	
*Check label for tofu made with calcium.	

What about supplements?

Women at risk for osteoporosis may need calcium supplements as part of their preventive care. If you are concerned about your bone health, speak to your doctor about your need for calcium. If you take a calcium supplement, it is better to take small amounts with meals rather than all at once. **If you use a supplement, do not get more than 2,500 mg of calcium per day from food and supplements together. This is the upper limit for persons 19-50 years; those over age 50 should not get more than 2,000 mg total daily calcium.**

It is recommended that we take calcium supplements that contain vitamin D, which is needed to absorb calcium. Do not take more than the recommended dosage on the bottle unless your doctor tells you to do so.

Where can I get more information?

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

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

- <http://womenshealth.gov/aging>
- http://www.niams.nih.gov/health_info/bone/default.asp
- <http://www.nutrition.gov>
- <http://www.nof.org>

For more information about vitamin D, see the UF/IFAS Extension publication “Facts about Vitamin D” at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy207>.

For more information about osteoporosis, see the UF/IFAS Extension publication “Prevent Osteoporosis: Catch the Silent Thief” at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy469> (en español: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy997>).