**Calcium**

**Why do we need calcium? What does it do?**

Calcium is one of the most important minerals in the body and is involved in much more than just bone formation. Calcium is required for our nerves to pass signals, for our blood to clot, our heart to pump, and our muscles to contract. Every cell in the body requires calcium, which is why the amount of calcium in the blood is tightly controlled. When levels begin to drop the body pulls calcium from the bones, which is our largest source of calcium storage. This process is called bone resorption, and can lead to weak, brittle bones (osteoporosis) as we age. We need to get large amounts of calcium from our food every day to prevent osteoporosis.

**How much calcium do we need?**

The recommended daily allowance (RDA) for calcium varies by age:

| **Age** | **Male** | **Female** | **Pregnant** | **Lactating** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 0–6 months\* | 200 mg | 200 mg |  |  |
| 7–12 months\* | 260 mg | 260 mg |  |  |
| 1–3 years | 700 mg | 700 mg |  |  |
| 4–8 years | 1,000 mg | 1,000 mg |  |  |
| 9–13 years | 1,300 mg | 1,300 mg |  |  |
| 14–18 years | 1,300 mg | 1,300 mg | 1,300 mg | 1,300 mg |
| 19–50 years | 1,000 mg | 1,000 mg | 1,000 mg | 1,000 mg |
| 51–70 years | 1,000 mg | 1,200 mg |  |  |
| 71+ years | 1,200 mg | 1,200 mg |  |  |

**How can I get enough calcium? Can’t I just drink milk?**

Cow’s milk isn’t the only source of calcium. In fact, cow’s milk has many potential problems. Many people lack the enzyme to digest lactose, the sugar naturally occurring in milk. This is condition is called “lactose intolerance,” and can lead to bloating, abdominal discomfort, and flatulence. Though all healthy babies have the enzyme (lactase) to digest the lactose in human milk, the amounts of lactase tend to gradually decrease after infancy (beginning at around 2 years of age). It is estimated that 90% of Asians and Africans are lactose intolerant, 70% of Hispanics and Jewish persons, 65% of Southern Indians, 30% of Central Europeans, and 5% of Northern Europeans. Persons who are not lactose intolerant may still have allergies or food sensitivities to the proteins casein or whey in dairy products.

There are other concerning issues with milk consumption as well. Cow’s milk has been linked to autoimmune conditions, including type I diabetes. It can also cause iron deficiency, atherosclerosis, and may exacerbate irritable bowel syndrome, autism, asthma and allergies. Milk also contains saturated (“unhealthy”) fats that can lead to heart disease and Alzheimer’s.

Though it is often touted as a good food for the bones, cow’s milk is also high in phosphorus, which actually contributes to osteoporosis.

**What are other sources of calcium?**

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| --- | --- |
| Blackstrap molasses, 2 tbsp | 400 mg |
| Sardines, 3 ounces | 324 mg |
| Collard greens, 1 cup | 357 mg |
| Calcium-fortified orange juice, 1 cup | 300 mg |
| Soy or rice milk, fortified, 1 cup | 200-300 mg |
| Firm tofu, 1/2 cup | 253 mg |
| Canned salmon, 3 ounces | 205 mg |
| Turnip greens, 1 cup | 215 mg |
| Kale, 1 cup | 179 mg |
| Soybeans, 1 cup | 175 mg |
| Okra, 1 cup | 172 mg |
| Bok choy, 1 cup | 158 mg |
| Mustard greens, 1 cup | 152 mg |
| Tahini, 2 tbsp | 128 mg |
| Broccoli, 1 cup | 94 mg |
| Almonds, 1/4 cup | 89 mg |
| Almond butter, 2 tbsp | 86 mg |