



Most children don't get enough calcium

I heard most children don't consume enough calcium. How much should they get?

It depends on how old they are. According to the current Dietary Reference Intake guidelines, children from 1 to 3 years old need 500 milligrams a day; 4 to 8 years, 800 milligrams; and 9 to 18 years, 1,300 milligrams.

But you are right about the problem of not getting enough. In fact, according to the National Institutes of Health, fewer than one in 10 girls and just one in four boys ages 9 through 13 are getting enough calcium. Some experts call osteoporosis a juvenile disease because poor bone mass in adulthood often begins in adolescence.

Young bodies need adequate calcium to build strong bones, especially during growth spurts. In fact, 90 percent of a person's peak bone mass for adulthood is established by the late teen years: The strength and health of an adult's bones largely depends on calcium intake during formative years. An added bonus: Some studies link diets rich in dairy products with more lean body mass and better weight management.

Other factors also help build bones, such as engaging in weight-bearing physical activity — walking, running, jumping rope, team sports, and weight lifting, for example. But calcium intake remains critical.

To determine how much calcium your children consume, use the Nutrition Facts label. It gives a percentage of the "Daily Value" for calcium per serving. But it's important to know the

label's Daily Value for calcium is only 1,000 milligrams, so keep that in mind. Anyone between 9 and 18 years old needs 130 percent of the Daily Value of calcium to reach the recommended amount of 1,300 milligrams.

While looking at labels, check for vitamin D, too. It helps the body absorb calcium. Most milk sold commercially has vitamin D added, but other dairy products, including cheese and ice cream, rarely is fortified with vitamin D. Some types of yogurt are, and some aren't. Just check the label.

Some calcium-rich foods include:

- Milk. One cup of milk has about 300 milligrams.
- Yogurt. Calcium content varies from about 275 up to 450 milligrams per cup.
- Cheese. Different varieties have different levels of calcium. An ounce of Swiss cheese has 225 milligrams; pasteurized process American cheese food has 160 milligrams per ounce.
- Cereals and juices. Some are fortified with calcium and can be an important source. Check the labels.
- Spinach. A cup of cooked frozen spinach has 290 milligrams, but unfortunately it also contains oxalic acid, which reduces the body's ability to absorb the calcium.

For more information, see the health institute's "Milk Matters" Web site at <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/milk/>.

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