Calcium Supplements for Osteoporosis: Are They Worth It?

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What to Know About the Best Calcium Supplements for Osteoporosis

As we age, our bones naturally lose some of their density. I always think about my own bone health since I was diagnosed with osteopenia over 10 years ago. Aside from regular exercise, I carefully consider what I eat to ensure my diet is healthy and reflects my bone health needs. While some bone loss is natural and dependent on many lifestyle factors, some individuals, like me, are at a greater risk of too much bone loss. This is where you might consider the best calcium supplements for osteoporosis. In this article, we will discuss all the aspects of calcium supplements, from what they exactly are, to the pros and cons.

Osteoporosis is a bone disease that results in the loss and weakening of bone at a higher rate than what is typically expected from just aging. As bone loss does not present any symptoms, it often goes unnoticed and undiagnosed. Many people do not learn they have osteoporosis until they suffer a bone fracture. When a person has osteoporosis, they lose bone density too quickly, resulting in frail bones. Treatment for osteoporosis is targeted at slowing or preventing this bone loss.

Calcium and Osteoporosis

When it comes to healthy bones, our bodies rely on two essential nutrients: calcium and vitamin D. These nutrients work hand in hand to ensure our bones can keep up with our busy lives.

Our calcium and vitamin D intake must be at appropriate levels from infancy right through our entire lifespan. If you are at risk of osteoporosis, or if you have a diagnosis of osteopenia or osteoporosis, your calcium and vitamin D intakes must be at a sufficient level to reduce your risk of bone loss and fractures. Luckily, there are many delicious and nutritious food options that will meet your needs for calcium when consumed in adequate quantities.

Understanding Labels

When reading the nutritional labels on packaged foods, including supplements, you may see this symbol: IU. This acronym means “international unit” and is the unit of measurement for vitamins, like vitamin D. Calcium’s unit of measure is typically in milligrams (mg). Knowing which foods are rich in calcium and vitamin D can help you make the best dietary choices. You may also want to consider taking a calcium supplement to boost your intake of these nutrients. You may find that consulting a dietician or nutritionist is of value when deciding whether a calcium supplement is right for you.

What Does Calcium Do?

Calcium works to rebuild our bones. It is a mineral that is stored in bones and teeth, reinforcing their composition and strength. As our bodies do not produce calcium, and because we lose calcium through skin, nails, hair, sweat, urine, and feces every day, we must consume adequate amounts of calcium daily. Calcium is also needed for our hearts, muscles, and nerves to perform their functions.

Unfortunately, as we age, our bodies may not absorb enough calcium. Without sufficient calcium, our bones are at risk of not being as strong as possible, which puts us at an increased risk of fractures.

Research on older adults suggests that a sufficient amount of calcium can slow down our bone loss and lower our risk of a painful and possibly life-changing fractures. Research has also shown that many of us are not getting the calcium we need to optimize our bone health.

How Much Calcium Do I Need?

How much calcium you need daily is primarily based on your age and sex, but other health conditions and pregnancy may impact your needs. Let's take a look at daily recommended calcium levels:

- Women and men under age 50: 1,000 milligrams
- Women over age 50: 1,200 milligrams
- Men over age 50: 1,000 milligrams

These amounts are available from a combination of foods alone, or foods and supplements.

Sources of Calcium

It is helpful to ensure your intake of calcium is sufficient by adding calcium-rich foods to your diet. Dairy is an excellent choice for calcium-rich foods, but there are several other tasty choices if you are sensitive to dairy or lactose intolerant:

- Soy
- Oranges
- Almonds
- Rice drinks
- Salmon
- Sardines
- Yogurt
- White beans

How to Tell if You Need Supplements

Most health experts recommend consuming sufficient amounts of calcium, either from our diet or, in rare cases, via a supplement. Most experts agree that it is best to obtain most of your dietary intake of calcium from food, as this method is natural and side effect free.

If your diet is too high in sodium and proteins, this may result in your body shedding calcium through your kidneys. Your need for a calcium supplement will depend on your dietary intake from foods, your age, and your health conditions. If you are unsure about your need for a calcium supplement, discuss your concerns with your healthcare team.

Calcium supplements are sold in most supermarkets, drug stores, and department stores. Available without a prescription, calcium supplements may be in a chewable or liquid form, often include flavors, and may consist of unwanted extras, like coloring.

2 Common Types of Calcium Supplements

There are currently two main types of calcium supplements, and they may also be included in multi-vitamin form. Calcium carbonate is the most common, and experts recommend that this supplement is taken with food to aid in its absorption. Calcium citrate is the second type of calcium supplement, and it can be taken without food.

When choosing a calcium supplement, the National Osteoporosis Foundation suggests that you carefully read the supplement label. First, the supplement you choose should specify how much calcium is contained in the supplement. Carefully consider the varied wording of servings and serving sizes. Your body optimally absorbs calcium in amounts of 500 milligrams or less at one time, and calcium supplements should be taken with food to help this absorption. When taking a calcium supplement, you may experience gas or constipation, so ensure you are drinking enough water.

The Pros and Cons of Calcium Supplements

Arm yourself with the correct information about your health and your body's need for nutrients to protect against bone loss and fractures. Ensuring that your calcium intake is adequate is just one aspect of preventing bone loss and fractures due to osteoporosis.

There are many calcium-rich food sources for you to explore! While many multivitamins contain some amount of calcium, they may not provide an amount that is right for you. Remember that in addition to calcium, your bones also require adequate amounts of vitamin D. If you are like me, it can sometimes be challenging to eat as healthy as I would like every day. These are the times when a calcium supplement may be beneficial, but calcium-rich foods are your best and first choice.

Read the labels on multivitamin packages to determine how much calcium they contain. There is the risk of intaking too much calcium; while rare, you still must consider how much calcium you are getting from both your diet and any supplements. Too much calcium in the blood, or hypercalcemia, can cause nausea and confusion. Excess calcium may also interfere with other nutrients and cause other health problems.

Some research suggests that calcium supplements may increase your risk of heart disease. Discuss your daily diet and your potential need for calcium supplements and any potential health complications with your doctor.

The goal is to have the healthiest bones possible. If you take too much calcium, it can affect a wide range of drugs, so check in with your doctor or pharmacist. Constipation and acid rebound are two less serious but potentially troubling side effects of taking calcium supplements.

Talk to Your Doctor

The decision to take a calcium supplement or increase your calcium intake through a multi-vitamin should be made in conversation with your health care team, who understands your overall health and medical treatments.