Boning Up with Calcium

So much is in the news about calcium, bone health and osteoporosis. How does one make sense of it all when facing the everyday challenges of shopping for, preparing and eating food?

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The relationship of nutrients to bone health is not as simple as you might think. Calcium is the best known nutrient of importance in maintaining the integrity of the bones, but there are other nutrients that work with calcium. The focus on this article is calcium; you can review the role of other bone nutrients in Bone Nutrient Interplay.

Calcium has been highly promoted for bone health, and rightly so, as calcium is part of the fabric of the bone matrix. When too much calcium is withdrawn from the bones to provide adequate calcium for other bodily functions (such as nerve and muscle function, maintaining the circulatory system, and manufacturing hormones and enzymes), the bone matrix loses its strength and becomes soft (osteopenia) and more porous, as in osteoporosis.

For adults, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommends 1,000 milligrams (mg) calcium per day, with 1,200 mg for women over 50 and men over age 70. Recent research has cast doubt on the practice of consuming excess calcium above daily needs in the form of supplements, however. Though inconclusive, some research has hinted that excess supplemental calcium may contribute to heart attack and kidney stones. What to do? Get your calcium from natural sources for the most part. Check your multivitamin, antacid preparations, fortified orange juice or other fortified foods and dietary supplements for calcium content - aim to consume only as much as is needed to get you to the recommended level, after getting as much of the target calcium level from food as possible.

Considering that a cup of milk or yogurt has about 300 mg calcium, and 1 oz. of natural cheese has roughly 200 mg, work towards the 1,000 or 1,200 mg target level. Other foods with calcium include 1/2 cup tofu made with calcium sulfate, contributing 430 mg, 1 cup cooked collard greens at 350 mg, 1/2 cup beans (legumes) at 90 mg and 1 oz. almonds at 75 mg. Other greens, oranges, dried figs, crab and sesame seeds also offer calcium in smaller amounts.

Consuming more than the recommended amount of calcium from supplemental sources may not only be unhelpful, but it may have negative impacts. Finally, too much sodium may cause you to excrete more calcium, ultimately leading to more bone loss and increased fracture risk, so try to keep sodium consumption lower than 2300 mg daily.

Vitamin D, phosphorous, and other nutrients are also critical to bone health, so a healthful diet is the best protection in providing a good balance of bone healthy nutrients. Planning meals with lower fat milk, yogurt and cheese products; adding a healthy mix of legumes, vegetables, soy products, greens, nuts, seeds and fruits while watching sodium intake will take you down the right path!

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