

## Calcium Supplements Becoming More Popular

**W**ith busy schedules and a new focus on preventative health maintenance, dietary supplements are gaining in popularity. A dietary supplement, as defined by the federal government, is a product taken orally containing a "dietary ingredient" intended to supplement the diet. Dietary supplements are substances that you eat or drink, and can contain vitamins, minerals, herbs or other plants, amino acids (the individual building blocks of protein), or parts of these substances. They can be in pill, capsule, tablet, or liquid form.

Calcium supplements in particular have become increasingly popular due to recent reports of a variety of benefits, such as cancer prevention and weight management. What is definitely known is that calcium is essential for regulating heartbeat, conducting nerve impulses, stimulating hormone secretions, clotting blood, and building and maintaining healthy bones.

Calcium is a mineral found in many foods. Getting enough of this nutrient is important as the human body does not produce it. Even after you are fully grown, adequate calcium intake is important because the body loses calcium every day through the skin, nails, hair, and sweat, as well as through urine and feces. This lost calcium must be replaced daily. Otherwise, the body takes calcium out of bones to perform other functions, which makes bones weaker and more likely to break over time.

Experts recommend that adults get 1,000 to 1,200 milligrams of calcium daily. Although food is the best calcium source, most Americans do not get enough of it from food sources. Calcium-fortified

foods (such as orange juice, bread, and cereals) and calcium supplements can fill the deficit by ensuring that you meet your daily calcium requirement.

Calcium exists in nature only in combination with other substances. These substances are called compounds. Several different calcium compounds are used in supplements, including:

- Calcium carbonate
- Calcium citrate
- Calcium phosphate

These compounds contain different amounts of elemental calcium, which is the actual amount of calcium in the supplement.

### Choosing a Calcium Supplement

Calcium supplements are available in a wide range of preparations and strengths, which can make selecting one a confusing experience. It is important to consult your community pharmacist to determine how much elemental calcium is in the supplement and how many doses or pills to take.

### PURITY

Choose calcium supplements with familiar brand names. Look for labels that state "purified" or have the USP (United States Pharmacopeia) symbol. Avoid calcium from unrefined oyster shell, bone meal, or dolomite without the USP symbol, because it may contain high levels of lead or other toxic metals.

### TOLERANCE

For certain people, some calcium supplements may cause side effects such as gas or constipation. If simple measures (such

as increasing your intake of fluids and high-fiber foods) do not solve the problem, you should try another form of calcium.

### CALCIUM INTERACTIONS

It is important to talk with your community pharmacist about possible interactions between your over-the-counter and prescription medications, and calcium supplements. For example, calcium supplements may reduce the absorption of some types of antibiotics. Calcium also interferes with iron absorption.

Whether through your diet or with the help of supplements, getting enough calcium will help maintain healthy bones. However, this is only one of the steps you need to take for bone health. Exercise, a healthy lifestyle, and, for some people, medication, are also important in achieving health goals.

It is important to note that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate dietary supplements in the same way it regulates medication. A dietary supplement can be sold with limited or no research on how well it works or its safety. Once a dietary supplement is marketed, FDA has to prove that the product is not safe to restrict its use or remove it from the market. In contrast, before being allowed to market a drug product, manufacturers must obtain FDA approval by providing convincing evidence that it is both safe and effective. This makes it even more important to consult your community pharmacist before beginning to regularly take any supplement. □

*Ask Your Family Pharmacist®*