



DYNAMIC AGING

The Calcium Connection

Is calcium really that important if you are a senior citizen? Yes! Calcium and vitamin D in your diet protect the calcium in your bones. If you are not getting enough calcium, your bones become your body's emergency supply of calcium. When this happens, your bones become weak, brittle, and break easily. Many women consume less than half of the daily recommended amount of calcium. Calcium alone cannot prevent or cure osteoporosis, but it is an important part of preventing osteoporosis.

So, how much calcium? If you are over 50, about 1200 to 1500 mg per day is recommended. 1200 mg is equivalent to four 8 ounce glasses of milk, but there are many other calcium rich foods from which to choose. The Food Guide Pyramid can be used as a tool for determining calcium rich foods you already enjoy. If you have a computer, go to www.mypyramid.gov and click on the "Tips and Resources" section, followed by the "Get Your Calcium Rich Foods" section. Now you can check out the calcium content of both dairy and non dairy foods. Milk products that are consumed in their low-fat or fat-free forms provide little or no solid fat, and are recommended by health professionals.

Why is it important to make fat free or low fat choices from the milk group?

Choosing foods from the milk group that are high in saturated fats and cholesterol can have health implications. Diets high in saturated fats raise "bad" cholesterol levels in the blood. The "bad" cholesterol is called LDL (low density lipoprotein) cholesterol. High LDL cholesterol, in turn, increases the risk for coronary heart disease. Many cheeses, whole milk, and products made from them, are high in saturated fat. Limiting foods that are high in saturated fat will help keep blood cholesterol levels healthy. In addition, intake of fats makes it difficult to avoid consuming more calories than are needed.

If you can't eat dairy foods, many products are now fortified with calcium, including juices, cereals, breads, soy beverages, or rice beverages. Canned fish (sardines, salmon with bones) soybeans and other soy products (soy based beverages, soy yogurt, tempeh), some other dried beans, and some leafy greens (collard and turnip greens, kale, bok choy), all contain calcium. However, calcium in vegetables is more difficult for the body to absorb.

If you avoid milk because of lactose intolerance, the most reliable way to get the health benefits of milk is to choose lactose reduced or low lactose alternatives within the milk group, such as cheese, yogurt, or lactase treated milk, or to consume the enzyme lactase before consuming milk products.

What is the role of Vitamin D? Vitamin D plays a major role in calcium absorption and bone health. You need 400 800 International Units of Vitamin D each day. Vitamin D allows calcium to leave the intestine and enter the bloodstream. Vitamin D can be found in D fortified dairy products, egg yolks, saltwater fish and liver. Vitamin D is manufactured in the skin following direct exposure to sunlight. About 10 15 minutes of sun exposure on your hands, arms and face two or three times a week meets the body's need for vitamin D.

Should you take calcium supplements? If you don't think you're getting enough calcium from your diet, supplements can also play a role in bone health. Talk to a physician, dietitian or pharmacist for the best calcium supplement for you. Supplements that also contain Vitamin D are preferred. There are several forms of calcium supplements available, but it is beyond the scope of this column to list them all.

In summary, my last three articles have stressed the importance of maintaining bone health as you age. In addition to the above dietary recommendations, remember that regular weight bearing activities (jogging, hiking, aerobics, climbing stairs, walking) and resistance exercise (free weights, weight machines, water exercises) are important components in maintaining bone health. Be sure to check out the free Senior Health Guide for local activities especially for seniors.