



Healthy & Nutrition

Calcium and Your Child

Milk and other calcium-rich foods have always been a must-have in kids' diets. After all, calcium is a key building block for strong, healthy bones. But more than 85% of girls and 60% of boys ages 9 to 18 fail to get the recommended 1,300 milligrams of calcium per day.

That's not surprising when you consider that many kids now drink more soda than milk, which is one of the best sources of calcium. And teens who smoke or drink soda, caffeinated beverages, or alcohol may get even less calcium because those substances interfere with the way the body absorbs and uses calcium.

But at every age, from infancy to adolescence, calcium is one nutrient that kids simply can't afford to skip.

What Calcium Does

During childhood and adolescence, the body uses the mineral calcium to build strong bones — a process that's all but complete by the end of the teen years. Bone calcium begins to decrease in young adulthood and progressive loss of bone occurs as we age, particularly in women.

Teens, especially girls, whose diets don't provide the nutrients to build bones to their maximum potential are at greater risk of developing the bone disease osteoporosis, which increases the risk of fractures from weakened bones. Younger kids and babies with little calcium and vitamin D intake (which aids in calcium absorption) are at increased risk for rickets. Rickets is a bone-softening disease that causes severe bowing of the legs, poor growth, and sometimes muscle pain and weakness.

Calcium plays an important role in muscle contraction, transmitting messages through the nerves, and the release of hormones. If blood calcium levels are low (due to poor calcium intake), calcium is taken from the bones to ensure normal cell function.

When kids get enough calcium and physical activity during childhood and the teen years, they can start out their adult lives with the strongest bones possible. Although there isn't definite scientific proof yet that taking in these amounts of calcium will result in stronger bones when kids grow up, the current recommendations are:

- 1 to 3 years — 500 milligrams of calcium daily
- 4 to 8 years — 800 milligrams
- 9 to 18 years — 1,300 milligrams

Getting enough calcium is just part of the equation. All children — from babies to teens — also should get 400 IU of vitamin D daily. If you don't think your child is getting the nutrients needed, talk to your doctor about modifying your child's diet or giving vitamin supplements to your child.