Calcium and Vitamin D

Why We Need Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium is a mineral that our bones need to stay healthy and strong. Vitamin D helps our bodies absorb the calcium we take in from foods and supplements. Together, these 2 nutrients help prevent osteoporosis (thinning of the bones). People at highest risk of osteoporosis are women and people who take oral steroids, such as prednisone. Osteoporosis can lead to serious bone fractures later in life. Vitamin D may also help prevent some types of cancer, such as colon cancer.

Sources of Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium

Dairy foods are a good source of calcium. A rough way to measure how many milligrams (mg) of calcium you are getting from dairy foods is to multiply the number of dairy-food servings you eat in a day times 300. One serving of milk or yogurt is 8 ounces. One serving of hard cheese, such as Swiss or cheddar, is 1 ounce. This means an 8-ounce glass of milk and 2 ounces of cheese contain about 900 mg of calcium.

Vitamin D

Sunlight, which contains ultraviolet (UV) light, helps our bodies make vitamin D. However, UV light can cause skin cancer, so the safest way to get vitamin D is from foods and supplements. Some foods that contain vitamin D are fatty fish, such as salmon, tuna, and sardines, eggs, fortified milk, and mushrooms that have been exposed to UV light. In the U.S., 400 IU of vitamin D is added to each quart of milk. IU, which stands for “international unit,” is a unit of measurement used for some vitamins.
Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Dermatology Center: 206-598-5065

The Effect of Sunscreens on Vitamin D Absorption

Studies of people who always use sunscreen to block the sun’s UV rays show that they have only slightly lowered levels of vitamin D in their bodies. This tells us that a lack of vitamin D from using sunscreen is likely not a major concern. But, because we know that getting enough vitamin D and calcium will keep our bones healthy and help prevent some cancers, taking oral supplements is a safe way to ensure we are getting enough of these nutrients.

Recommended Amounts of Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium

For most people, the recommended daily amount of calcium is 1,000 mg. People who take steroids daily and some women may need up to 1,500 mg of calcium each day.

Calcium supplements come in many forms, and they always are made with another compound. For instance, TUMS tablets are made with the compound calcium carbonate. A 1,000 mg TUMS tablet may contain only 400 mg of actual calcium. Check labels to find out the amount of actual calcium in different calcium supplements.

Our bodies can absorb only 500 mg of calcium at one time, so take up to 500 mg with 2 or 3 of your meals to reach your goal for the day.

Vitamin D

The recommended daily amount of vitamin D is currently unclear, but 1,000 to 1,200 IU is probably enough. Do not take more than this unless your doctor advises you to. Too much vitamin D can lead to kidney stones and other health problems. You can take your daily amount of vitamin D all at once. Or, you can take smaller amounts with meals and calcium supplements, if that is convenient for you.

To Learn More

Visit these websites to find out more about calcium and vitamin D: