Calcium

Calcium is an important nutrient for people of all ages and it's not just for strong bones and teeth! This Food Fact Sheet lists how much calcium different people need and what foods and drinks are good sources of it.

What is calcium?

Calcium is an essential mineral that is needed to maintain strong bones. It is also needed for healthy muscle and nerve function.

How much calcium do I need?

Table 1 - daily guideline amounts

Group	Age (years)	Calcium (mg) per day
Infants	Under 1	525
Children	1-3 4-6 7-10	350 450 550
Adolescents	11-18	800 (girls) 1000 (boys)
Adults	19-55	700
Breastfeeding mums		1250
Women following the menopause and men over 55 years		1200
People living with coeliac disease*	19+	1000-1500
People living with osteoporosis	19+	
Inflammatory bowel disease (while taking corticosteroids)*	19+	800-1000

**Discuss the need for a calcium supplement with your doctor or dietitian.*

You are more at risk of calcium deficiency if you:

- are on a cow's milk or lactose-free diet
- are living with coeliac disease
- are living with osteoporosis
- are breastfeeding
- are post-menopausal

Can I get enough calcium from plant-based sources?

Yes! There are lots of plant-based foods and drinks that contain calcium listed in the table on the next page.

In the UK many plant-based alternatives to dairy are fortified with calcium (they have extra calcium added to them).

It is important to check that the products you are buying contain added calcium as many organic products, for example, are not fortified. Without added calcium, these dairy alternative foods and drinks do not have a noticeable amount of calcium in them. It's also worth noting that most plant-based alternatives to dairy, like rice, oat or nut drinks, also contain less protein and calories than cow, goat or sheep milk.

Foods reducing calcium availability

Spinach, dried fruits, beans, seeds and nuts contain calcium but they also contain oxalates and/or phytates, which reduce how much calcium your body can absorb from them. You should not rely on them as your main sources of calcium.

Meals and snack ideas

- Start the day with cereal (many are calcium-fortified) with milk (or a calcium-fortified plant-based alternative).
- Use tinned sardines or pilchards (with the bones) instead of tuna in a sandwich or on toast.
- Have a stir fry including calcium-set tofu, broccoli spears and chopped nuts.
- If your child will not drink milk, include milk and milk alternatives in meals and snacks instead.
- Add yoghurt (or a calcium-fortified plant-based alternative) to fruit as a pudding or use milk or a milk substitute (calcium-fortified) to make custard and milk puddings.
- Include foods containing dairy or a plant-based alternative e.g. lasagne, cheese on toast, pancakes, naan breads, scones.
- Try a glass of low-fat milk or a plant-based alternative as a snack or to help rehydrate after exercising.

Healthy lifestyle advice for healthy bones

- Be active - weight bearing activities like walking, aerobics, cycling, running and tennis are best. Aim for at least 30 minutes of activity, five times a week.
- Smoking is associated with an increased risk of osteoporosis, low bone density and increased risk of hip fracture. Stopping smoking prevents further excess bone loss.

Vitamin D and calcium

Vitamin D helps your body to absorb and use calcium from the foods you eat. It's important to have enough vitamin D to support this. For more information about how to meet your requirements see our Vitamin D Food Fact Sheet.

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Calcium supplements

You should try to get enough calcium from the food you eat. If you are unable to meet your daily requirements from food alone, you can take supplements to top up your intake.

Calcium in dairy products	Quantity	Calcium (mg)
Cow's milk, including lactose-free	200ml	240
Sheep's milk	200ml	340
Goat's milk	200ml	200-240
Cheese: Cheddar/ Edam /Halloumi Cottage	matchbox-size: 30g 100g	 240 120
Cheese triangle	1 triangle (15 -17.5g)	120
Yoghurt (plain)	150g	240
Fromage frais	1 pot (50g)	60
Rice pudding or custard pots	1 pot (55g)	60
Malted milk drink	25g serving in 200ml semi-skimmed milk	800
Rice pudding	½ large tin (200g)	180
Custard - tinned	1 serving (120ml)	120
Milk chocolate	30g	70

Non dairy sources of calcium Calcium-fortified products*	Quantity	Calcium (mg)
Calcium-fortified plant-based alternatives to milk e.g. soya, oat, nut, coconut, pea, rice* drinks	100 ml	120-190
Soya bean curd/tofu (only if set with calcium chloride (E509) or calcium sulphate (E516), not nigari)	100g (uncooked weight)	300
Calcium-fortified soya, coconut or oat yoghurt and soya dessert or custard	100g	120-210
Calcium-fortified coconut cheese	1 portion (30g)	45-220
Calcium-fortified infant cereals	1 serving (20g)	120
Calcium-fortified cereals	30g serving	135-175
Calcium-fortified instant hot oat cereal	1 tbsp dry cereal (15g)	200
Calcium-fortified bread	1 slice (37-50g)	85-180
Sardines (with bones) (in tomato sauce, olive oil, brine)	½ tin (60g)	240
Pilchards (with bones)	1 serving (60g)	150
Tinned salmon (with bones)	½ tin (106g)	60
Whitebait	1 small portion (50g)	430
Scampi in breadcrumbs	6 pieces (90g)	90
White bread	2 large slices (100g)	155
Wholemeal bread	2 large slices (100g)	105
Pitta bread/chapatti	1 portion (65g)	90
Orange	1 medium (120g)	30
Broccoli, boiled	2 spears (85g)	40
Kale	100g boiled	150
Spring greens	1 serving (75g)	55

*Children under four and a half years old should not have rice drinks as a replacement for cow's milk, breast milk or infant formula.

If you are taking medication, other supplement products, or if you think you need more than 500mg of extra calcium, it is advisable to discuss this with a healthcare professional as some supplements are not very easy to absorb.

It has been reported that calcium supplements have been linked to an increased risk of heart problems, this has been reviewed by the Department of Health who did not feel it necessary to alter advice about prescribing calcium supplements, as the study methods may have errors and it was not clear how calcium supplements might affect the heart. If you are concerned about taking calcium supplements please speak to your doctor or a registered dietitian.

Top tips

- Getting enough calcium is important for health including maintaining normal bone, teeth, muscle and nerve function. You need vitamin D to absorb the calcium in your diet.
- Low-fat dairy products have the same amount of calcium as the full-fat versions.
- Not all plant-based alternatives to dairy are fortified with calcium. In fact, organic products are not fortified and contain little calcium.
- Most people can get enough calcium from a varied and nutritious diet, some people may need supplements and you should speak to a registered dietitian or health professional about this.

This Food Fact Sheet is a public service of the British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian.

If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or find a private dietitian.
This resource has been produced by the BDA in partnership with Registered Dietitians Duane Mellor and George Politis.

The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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