

Calcium Supplements: Making the Decision to Take or Not to Take

After years of encouraging people to take calcium supplements to prevent broken hips, backs, elbows and ankles, there is news that calcium can cause heart attacks. Before you dump that bottle of calcium, we thought you should know more.

The whole topic of calcium causing heart attacks came from an article published in the British Medical Journal in July 2010. The authors of the article had combined the results of 16 studies about calcium effects. The studies included about 20,000 people in total. The studies were similar in that they:

- Compared treatment with calcium 500mg or more a day to taking a placebo tablet with no calcium
- Studied people at least 40 years of age
- Collected information about calcium effects for at least one year
- Did not include people taking calcium and Vitamin D

When they added together all the data, the authors found that the people taking calcium supplements were 30% more likely to have a heart attack than those taking a placebo tablet.

How could calcium increase the risk of heart attacks?

No one knows for sure if and how high levels of calcium do cause heart attacks.

- It has been suggested that high levels of calcium can lead to calcium build-up in the blood vessels (just like cholesterol builds up in blood vessels) and hurt blood flow.
- Others think that high levels of calcium might make blood clot easier. This could lead to clots that go to the heart and stop blood flow in the blood vessels of the heart.

Does this mean you shouldn't take calcium?

Experts all over the world are arguing about this. Here's what they are saying.

The study results may not apply to most people. Most people take Vitamin D with calcium and Vitamin D has been shown to lower the risk of heart attacks. Experts

question whether studies of people taking calcium plus Vitamin D would have shown harmful effects.

Experts wonder if something other than calcium was the real cause of the heart attacks. The studies found that heart attacks occurred soon after calcium was started, but it would take years for calcium to build up in blood vessels.

Some experts are calling for people to stop calcium because of the new information. Others say that calcium and Vitamin D are important for preventing broken bones and that several important studies showing their benefit were excluded from the analysis.

Some are recommending a low dose of calcium supplements. People younger than 50 years of age need 1000mg of calcium per day. People over 50 years need about 1200mg per day. A usual diet that includes two servings of high-calcium foods, like orange juice, includes at least 900mg of calcium per day. So some doctors suggest a dose of just 300mg of calcium a day.

What should you do?

American diets are usually low in calcium and vitamin D so just stopping your therapy may not be the best option.

- Watch for more news about calcium and heart attacks as the experts look into this issue. The website <http://www.JustAskBlue.com> can lead you to credible Internet websites about calcium use.
- Be sure that all your healthcare providers know if you take calcium and be sure to ask their opinion about its safety.
- If you were prescribed calcium and Vitamin D for the prevention of bone fractures, talk to your doctor before making any changes in your therapy. Ask about your personal benefits and risks for taking these supplements.
- If you are taking calcium alone consider taking Vitamin D also. It is suggested that people get 800U to 2000U of Vitamin D3 each day.
- If you started calcium therapy on your own, think about increasing the amount of calcium in your diet so that you can take a lower dose of calcium supplement or none at all.
- Consider taking Vitamin D3 alone. This can increase the amount of calcium that is absorbed into your blood. Some think that Vitamin D3 alone may be as beneficial as taking both calcium and Vitamin D supplements.

- Get plenty of exercise to keep your bones strong.

Sorry, there's no clear answer

New information often causes medical experts to second-guess current health advice. Sometimes following the new information improves health. Sometimes it turns out to be bad advice. Often, there is no solid scientific proof about what is the best advice to follow.

Talk to your doctor and pharmacist about calcium supplements and whether it's a good decision for you to take this medicine. Don't be surprised if you get different opinions. The more information you get, the better, because in the end, the decision is yours!

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