



Osteoporosis Canada

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‘A newsletter from COPN’

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Remember: You can live well with osteoporosis!

Is it time to stop your calcium supplements?

When it rains, it pours! It seems the media was out in droves these past couple of weeks with news reports that would scare any patient with osteoporosis. One of these news stories brought a newspaper headline that said: “*Calcium pills may double heart attack risk.*” This was based on an article published in the British Medical Journal.

This is important information for Osteoporosis Canada to review. Our team of experts in this field was asked to review the British Medical Journal article and the study it was based on. The team included five of the top experts in this field in Canada:

- Dr. Stephanie Atkinson, Biochemist and Nutritionist, McMaster University
- Dr. Susan Barr, Nutritionist and Dietitian, University of British Columbia
- Dr. Susan Whiting, Nutritionist, University of Saskatchewan
- Dr. Bill Leslie, Internal Medicine and Radiology, University of Manitoba
- Dr. Alexandra Papaioannou, Geriatrician, McMaster University

What did the study show?

This study from New Zealand was looking at whether calcium supplements could increase the risk of heart attacks, strokes and/or other vascular events in postmenopausal women with osteoporosis. There were 2 groups in this study, each group comprised of about 730 patients. One group of patients received calcium citrate tablets in divided doses that added up to 1000 mg a day. The other group received placebo tablets (dummy pills). Both groups continued with their usual diet that contained on average close to 900 mg a day (that’s more calcium than the average Canadian gets in his/her diet).

Both groups were observed closely over a period of five years for any heart attack, stroke or other vascular events. It was noticed that the group who were taking the calcium tablets were twice as likely to have a heart attack. It was also noted that the patients who were religious at taking their calcium supplements were more likely to end up with heart attacks.

Putting this study in the right light

The above study results can be worrisome if we look at them by themselves. However, this type of study has already been done with much different results. In fact, another scientific group in the United States had done a very similar but much bigger study in 36,282 postmenopausal women. In that study, there was no increase in the risk of heart disease, stroke or any other vascular events in the women who were taking calcium supplements. The larger number of patients in the US study makes it a more powerful and believable study.

Our experts also noted that in the New Zealand study, the women who were taking the calcium tablets were getting much more total calcium (calcium in their diet + calcium from the supplements) than is recommended by Osteoporosis Canada. Although no one can be sure about this based on this study alone, it is possible that taking **too much** calcium can be harmful to your health.

So, are you taking too much calcium?

Everything in moderation is a very good guide. This applies to calcium as well. There is no need to go overboard on calcium. Just the right amount will do to keep your bones healthy. Going overboard won't make your bones any healthier.

Osteoporosis Canada currently recommends a total calcium intake (diet +/- supplements) of

- 1000 mg for men and women under age 50
- 1500 mg for men and women over age 50.

So, to know if you need to take a calcium supplement, you really need to know how much calcium you are getting in your diet. Here is a very simple way to calculate this.

First, give yourself 300 mg of calcium simply for eating. This is because there is calcium in a variety of foods such as bread, muffins, oranges, etc. At the end of the day, even without eating any high calcium foods, you can't help but get about 300 mg of calcium in your daily diet.

Now, add 300 mg for any of the following high calcium foods:

- 1 cup of milk (any milk, including whole milk, 2%, skim or chocolate milk)
- 1 cup of fortified soya milk
- 1 cup of fortified (or calcium rich) orange juice
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of yogurt
- 2 slices of cheese
- one chunk of cheese (about the size of a half deck of cards).

How did you do? Write your total here: _____.

If you are already getting close to the recommended amount of calcium for your age group, then you are doing great. Getting all of your calcium from your diet is the best way to go. There is nothing magic about a calcium supplement. Your body needs calcium and you are already getting the calcium you need from your diet. You therefore should not take a calcium supplement.

If you are not quite getting the recommended amount of calcium for your age group, then you should consider taking a calcium supplement to make up for the difference. Your body and your bones do need to get enough calcium each day. If you can't do that with diet alone, then taking a supplement is the right way to go for you.

Should you throw away your calcium supplements? Well in the end, it all depends whether you are getting enough calcium from your diet. Make sure your bones are getting enough calcium each day. Whether you get your calcium from your diet or from a combination of diet and calcium supplements is really up to you.

Don't forget - If you are taking a combination Calcium plus Vitamin D supplement and you are going to decrease this to stay within the guidelines of total calcium intake of 1000 or 1500 mg per day, make sure you reassess your vitamin D intake. Make sure to find a supplement with Vitamin D alone if needed.

Just remember: don't go overboard on calcium. Everything in moderation.

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To share your stories or questions about osteoporosis please contact us at

Osteoporosis Canada Volunteer line at 1-800-463-6842,

or

e-mail COPN at

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or

visit our website at

<http://www.osteoporosis.ca/COPN>