

Patient education: Calcium and vitamin D for bone health (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

Why are calcium and vitamin D important for bone health?

Calcium and vitamin D are important for bone health, because they can:

- Help keep bones strong
 - Prevent bones from breaking easily, especially bones in the spine
 - Help keep teeth healthy and strong
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What can happen if people do not have healthy bones?

People who do not have healthy bones can have a condition called "osteoporosis." Osteoporosis can cause bones to:

- Become thin and weak
- Break more easily – Bone breaks often occur in the spine, hip, and arm bones near the wrist.

Doctors can use different treatments for osteoporosis, including medicines. But it's also important to eat and drink foods that have calcium and vitamin D. Eating enough calcium and vitamin D is an important first step in preventing and treating osteoporosis.

What foods and drinks have calcium and vitamin D?

Different foods and drinks have calcium and vitamin D ([figure 1](#)). Some foods and drinks have more calcium and vitamin D than others.

Foods and drinks that have a lot of calcium include:

- Milk, yogurt, cheese, cottage cheese, ice cream, and other dairy foods
- Green vegetables, such as kale, collard greens, and broccoli
- Certain nuts and breads
- Foods that have calcium added to them, such as juices, cereals, and soy products

Foods and drinks that have a lot of vitamin D include:

- Milk, orange juice, or yogurt with vitamin D added
- Salmon or mackerel
- Canned tuna fish
- Cereals with vitamin D added
- Cod liver oil

Your body can also get vitamin D from the sun. The body uses sunlight that shines on the skin to make vitamin D. But doctors don't suggest spending a lot of time in the sun to get vitamin D. That's because getting too much sun can lead to serious problems, including skin cancer.

What are supplements?

Supplements are pills, capsules, liquids, or tablets that have nutrients in them. Supplements are another way people can get calcium and vitamin D. Some supplements contain either calcium or vitamin D. Others have both.

Do I need to take calcium or vitamin D supplements?

People who do not get enough calcium or vitamin D from their food and drink might need to take supplements.

If your doctor recommends that you take calcium or vitamin D supplements, ask him or her which type, how much, and when to take the supplements. For example, some calcium supplements can be taken with food, but others should be taken on an empty stomach.

The type and dose of supplement that is right for you will also depend on your medical problems and the other medicines you take.

What are some common side effects of calcium supplements?

Common side effects of calcium supplements can include:

- Constipation – People who are constipated can have trouble having bowel movements.
- Upset stomach

Many people find that they can reduce these side effects by splitting up their calcium dose. For example, they might take a few small doses of calcium each day instead of one large dose.

Taking calcium supplements can also increase a person's chance of getting kidney stones. Kidney stones are small, hard stone-like objects that can form in a person's kidneys.

How much calcium and vitamin D do I need each day?

It depends, because each person is different. Ask your doctor or nurse how much calcium and vitamin D you need each day. Women who have gone through menopause and no longer get monthly periods usually need more calcium each day than women who still get monthly periods.

It is important not to take too much calcium or vitamin D. Taking too much calcium or vitamin D can cause problems.

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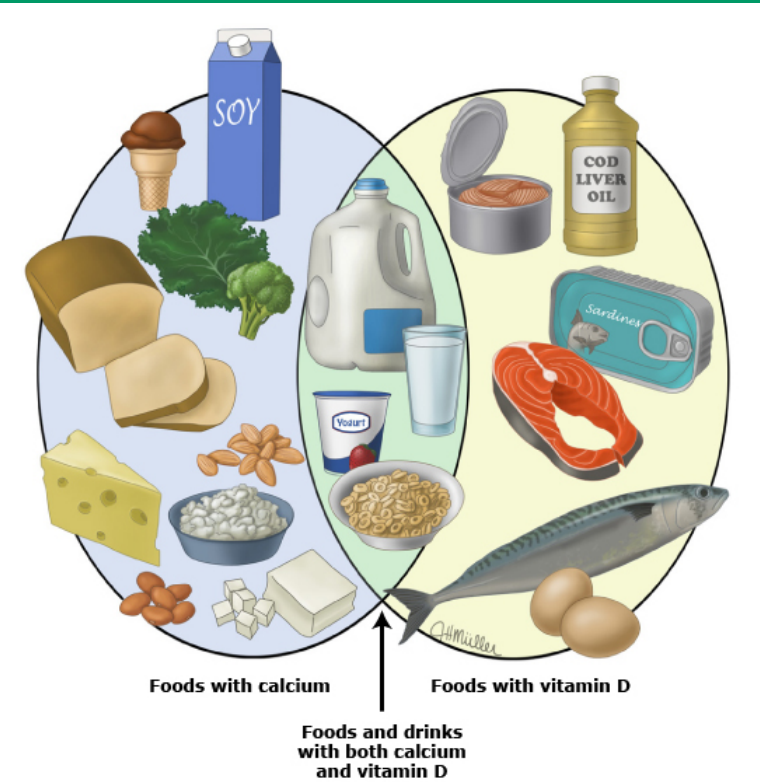
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GRAPHICS

Foods and drinks with calcium and vitamin D



Foods rich in calcium include ice cream, soy milk, breads, kale, broccoli, milk, cheese, cottage cheese, almonds, yogurt, ready-to-eat cereals, beans, and tofu. Foods rich in vitamin D include milk, canned tuna fish, cod liver oil, yogurt, ready-to-eat-cereals, cooked salmon, canned sardines, mackerel, and eggs. Some of these foods are rich in both.