

Super Foods for Your Bones

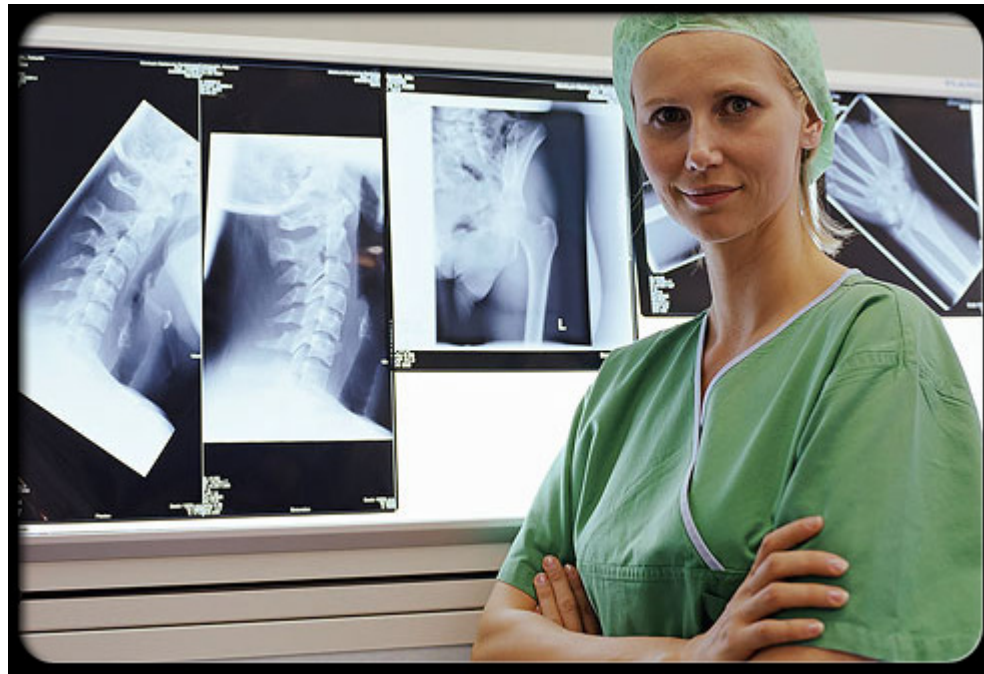
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Strong Bones: Yours to Keep

Our bones remain strong throughout young adulthood. As we hit middle age, they slowly begin to thin out. In women, this process accelerates after menopause, but there are ways to put on the brakes. One of the best lines of defense is your diet -- eating the right foods can give you the maximum peak bone mass and boost your bone density at any age.



Got Milk?

Calcium is the cornerstone of strong bones. Adults younger than 50 need 1,000 milligrams per day, and people over 50 need 1,200 milligrams a day. The pop star of calcium sources is undoubtedly milk. A single 8-ounce cup of milk, whether skim, low-fat, or whole, has 300 milligrams of calcium.



Yogurt & Cheese

Not a milk drinker? A cup of yogurt has at least as much calcium as an 8-ounce cup of milk. And one ounce of Swiss cheese has nearly as much. Even if you're lactose intolerant, there are now plenty of dairy products that are lactose-reduced or lactose-free. Removing lactose from milk and dairy foods does not affect the calcium content.



Sardines

Milk and dairy products are not the only ways to get calcium. Another excellent source is sardines. All those little fish bones have just what you need to build bone mass in your own body. Eating 3 ounces of canned sardines delivers a little more calcium than a cup of milk.



Chinese Cabbage

You might be surprised to learn that calcium is plentiful in certain vegetables. Half a cup of Chinese cabbage provides calcium equal to that in an 8-ounce glass of milk. One cup of turnip greens offers 200 milligrams of calcium. Although spinach and broccoli contain some calcium, you'll need multiple servings to get anywhere close to what's found in milk.



Fortified Foods

If dairy products, sardines, and leafy greens leave you cold, consider eating fortified foods. These are products that do not naturally contain calcium but have been enhanced with varying amounts of the essential mineral. Breakfast foods are a great start -- fortified orange juice has up to 240 milligrams of calcium, and fortified cereals deliver up to 1,000 milligrams per cup. Check the nutritional label for the exact amount.



Calcium Supplements

Supplements are an easy way to boost your calcium intake, but some reports suggest you may not need them. If you're already getting enough calcium from the foods you eat, taking more in pill form won't contribute to bone health. Experts say there's no benefit in getting more than 1,500 milligrams of calcium per day. To maximize absorption of calcium supplements, take no more than 500 milligrams at one time. Most calcium supplements should be taken with meals; however, calcium citrate and calcium malate can be taken anytime.



Soy Foods

Half a cup of tofu contains 258 milligrams of calcium, but calcium is not the only mineral that gives bones a leg up. New research suggests plant-based chemicals called isoflavones strengthen bone density as well. Isoflavones are plentiful in soy foods, such as tofu, and appear to have an estrogen-like effect on the body. This may make soy useful in warding off bone disease in postmenopausal women.



Salmon

Salmon and other types of fatty fish offer an array of bone-boosting nutrients. They contain calcium as well as vitamin D, which assists in calcium absorption. They're also high in omega-3 fatty acids. Fish oil supplements have been shown to reduce bone loss in elderly women and may prevent osteoporosis.



Nuts & Seeds

Nuts and seeds can bolster bone health in several ways. Almonds, pistachios, and sunflower seeds are all high in calcium. Walnuts and flaxseeds are packed with omega-3 fatty acids. Peanuts and almonds contain potassium, which protects against the loss of calcium in urine. Nuts also contain protein and other nutrients that play a supportive role in building strong bones.



Hold the Salt

Salt is a major culprit in depriving the body of calcium. The more salt you eat, the more calcium gets carried away by urine. Sticking to a low-salt diet can help you keep more calcium to strengthen your bones.



Sunshine

OK, sunshine is technically not a food. But it is the best source of a nutrient that is found in surprisingly few foods. The body produces vitamin D in response to sunlight. Without vitamin D, our bodies cannot properly absorb calcium. Although milk is often fortified with vitamin D, one 8-ounce cup is usually not enough to maximize calcium absorption. Doctors recommend taking a vitamin D supplement if you live in an area where sun exposure is limited.



Weight-Bearing Exercise

To get the most out of your bone-boosting diet, you'll want to do regular weight-bearing exercise. This includes any activity that uses the weight of your body or outside weights to stress the bones and muscles. The result is that your body lays down more bone material, and your bones become denser. Brisk walking, dancing, tennis, and yoga have all been shown to benefit your bones.



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