

Stop Flushing Your Calcium Away

By Beverly Burmeier

If you are taking a calcium supplement every morning, you might just be flushing a significant percentage of it down the toilet. Research reveals that consuming certain foods, such as coffee or wheat bran (think cereal or toast), can interfere with calcium absorption or cause its elimination through urine. That's important, because, according to Elson Haas, author of *Staying Healthy with Nutrition* (Celestial Arts, 2006; not available at Costco), you typically use only 30 to 50 percent of calcium from the foods you eat anyway.

When amounts fall short, the body takes calcium from bones, decreasing density and increasing the risk for fractures. Since your body can't make calcium alone, and you lose calcium daily through skin, nails, hair, sweat, and urine, the National Osteoporosis Foundation (*noforg*) says you've got to help it get—and keep—enough. Knowing which foods to avoid when taking a supplement or eating calcium-rich foods can help your body use more of the calcium you consume.

Foods that dilute calcium

Spinach, sweet potatoes, rhubarb, and cocoa contain high amounts of oxalates, which reduce the absorption of calcium from those foods. To increase calcium intake, add cheese or a cream sauce to the veggies.

Sodium (salt) increases calcium excretion through urine and sweat, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH; *nih.gov*). It doesn't take a lot to make a difference. For example, a typical one-ounce serving of tiny pretzel twists has up to 22 percent of your total daily requirement of sodium, which can increase calcium loss. The NIH suggests adding potassium-rich foods like bananas or cantaloupe to help counteract this effect.

High-fiber foods, like 100 percent wheat bran, reduce the absorption of calcium in other foods eaten at the same time. The result: You lose the calcium benefit of the milk in your cereal. When you increase fiber, try to increase calcium intake, too.

Caffeine, a diuretic, can also increase calcium loss through urination. If you take a calcium supplement in the morning, wait a couple of hours before drinking tea, coffee or cola. A smart option is to consider taking your supplement in the afternoon or evening, when you're probably already limiting caffeine.

Foods high in phosphorus, including meat, poultry, corn, and potatoes, also interfere with calcium absorption, according to Haas. A diet with twice as much calcium as phosphorus is ideal, but the typical Western diet, which is high in meat, provides up to four times more phosphorus than calcium.

Ways to boost calcium intake

- Increase vitamin D, either through sunshine or supplements, to aid absorption.
- Add magnesium, which keeps calcium soluble and available in your body.

- Take your calcium supplement with a glass of orange juice because vitamin C (ascorbic acid) improves calcium absorption.
- Get an extra 50 mg of calcium by adding a tablespoon of nonfat powdered milk when cooking soups, casseroles, muffins, and other foods.
- Split your supplemental intake into doses of about 500 mg at a time. Haas suggests taking calcium supplements at noon and at bedtime.
- Consume more calcium-rich foods, like beans (navy or white), Chinese cabbage, dairy products, fortified cereals, leafy greens, nuts, seafood (crab, salmon, ocean perch, sardines, shrimp), and seeds.

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