

Why the body needs calcium

by Lynette Louw

Osteoporosis means that the bones in your body have decalcified. They have become brittle and break easily. Osteoporosis can be inherited from your mother or grandmother. It can also be part of the natural ageing process, because as we grow older, we lose bone mass. This is normal and affects especially elderly women. But osteoporosis can often be prevented with a change of lifestyle.

Exercising

Regular exercise such as walking or jogging, is a good way of keeping bones strong and healthy. Outdoor exercise is healthier than indoor exercise, because outside your body is exposed to sunlight. Sunlight helps the body to produce vitamin D. Vitamin D helps the body to absorb calcium.

Calcium

The human body cannot do without calcium. In fact, 99% of the calcium found in the body, is stored in the bone structure. But calcium is also important for our metabolism. It ensures that our nerve and muscle functions run smoothly. It is also important for our hormones, our blood and the enzymes that work in our bodies.

If we do not ingest enough calcium, our bodies will start taking calcium from its own bones, to maintain other bodily systems. And this is when healthy bones start turning into weak, brittle bones that break easily.

How much do we need?

The average person and children between the ages of one and ten years old, need about 800 milligrams of calcium (two to three glasses of milk) per day. Pregnant women and teenagers need about 1 200 milligrams (three to four glasses of milk) per day.

Dairy products are the best form of calcium available. Other foods such as red meat also contain calcium, but the amounts are too little to meet the body's calcium requirements. If you do not like milk, you can use other dairy products such as yoghurt, amasi and cheese. You can even eat custard or soup with fresh cream in it. But milk remains the best form of calcium.

Calcium guide

A 250 ml glass of milk contains 295 grams of calcium. This is equal to:

- 560 ml of broccoli
- 560 ml of peanuts
- 14 slices of wholewheat bread
- 11 medium-sized boiled eggs
- 250 ml of unflavoured yoghurt (2 small tubs)
- 40 grams of cheddar or Gouda cheese (two cubes the size of a matchbox)
- 500 ml of cottage cheese (two tubs)
- 50 ml of cheese spread
- 375 ml dairy ice-cream 