

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Calcium - Fortified, or Food?

Calcium is one of the minerals most of us don't get enough of in our diets. Many people have problems digesting lactose, the sugar in milk. Some just don't like the flavor of milk, or the texture of cheese. Or we don't like to take big tablets. But never fear – the food industry comes to our rescue with lots of calcium-fortified foods. Or does it? Can a bottle of calcium-fortified water and a calcium-added cereal bar make up for the missing mineral from our other foods?

They might, for a few people, but they could cause more problems for others. Even though they look like food, to our bodies calcium-fortified items are more like glorified calcium pills than they are nutritious foods. That means bets are off on nutritional value. There are several reasons why.

First, the calcium might never make it into our stomachs. Calcium doesn't dissolve very well. In many liquids added calcium settles to the bottom of the bottles. We might give the bottle a few flips, but that's not enough to get all the calcium up into the beverage again. We can drink the liquid but the calcium stays in the bottle.

We know that our bodies can absorb the calcium from milk and dairy products better than from any other food. We also absorb it pretty well from the soft bones of fish like salmon and sardines. And we get some calcium from dark leafy greens. It's not as absorbable as the calcium in milk, but we do get some of it. The calcium in fortified orange juice is available, and absorbed. They've studied that. But for many other foods with added calcium we have no idea whether we get it or not. What other ingredients there are in the food make a difference in how well we absorb it. Just adding calcium to a recipe, or a food label, is no guarantee that your body will ever get it.

Also, our bodies limit how much calcium they can absorb at one time. When it comes in a food that naturally contains calcium it's easy for our stomachs and intestines to control what gets through. Other ingredients such as the proteins in milk help to make it more digestible. But when we take a pill or eat a fortified food we are dumping a whole lot of calcium into our systems without its usual assistants. Some of it is simply wasted, going in one end of our system and out the other end.

Or, if we force our bodies to take a bigger lump of it than usual there can be problems.

Several studies have suggested that calcium coming from supplements, calcium tablets, might increase our chances of getting kidney stones. That is a super-painful condition you never want to wish on yourself or anyone else! While the doctors haven't figured out how or why, calcium from dairy products seems to help protect us from stones.

Large doses of calcium also affect how much iron we can absorb. If both calcium and iron are in the gut at the same time, our bodies will prefer to absorb just the calcium. And large doses of calcium can interfere with certain other medications, from thyroid hormones to some antibiotics. That's why some drug labels say "Do not take with milk or dairy." Calcium from fortified cereal bars or vitamin water could do the same thing.

We need calcium for sure, but foods that naturally contain it are by far the best. If you're using fortified foods or supplements read the labels. Don't get more than 1,200 mg a day from all the sources. And try to spread them out across the day so you don't get a super-dose at any one time.

Now if you really can't handle milk products, here's a salmon patty recipe to give you your calcium. Use canned salmon and mash the bones with a fork until they disappear. Serve on buns like burgers, or with salsa on the side, and a big salad.

Salmon Burgers

1 can (14.5 oz) salmon	1 Tbsp margarine or butter
2 eggs	¼ C chopped fresh parsley
1 onion, chopped	1 tsp dry mustard
2 Tbsp finely chopped green pepper	hot sauce to taste
2/3 C fine cracker crumbs	3 Tbsp oil

Drain salmon, save the juice. Flake the fish and mash any bones. Melt margarine in skillet. Add onions and sauté until tender. Beat eggs lightly. Add onions, fish, half the cracker crumbs, all the other ingredients, and the juice from the can, to the eggs. Mix gently until evenly blended, then shape into 6 patties. Coat with the remaining cracker crumbs. Heat oil in skillet and fry patties until lightly browned, turn over and finish cooking. Serves 6.

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