



# The healthy Corner aging

Part of Parke County's Healthy Aging and Cancer Prevention Initiative

## Calcium Supplements, Heart Attacks

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*The unexpected conclusions from a recent study are not-so-surprising seen through the lens of "more of a good thing is not necessarily better"*

Calcium supplements are widely used by Americans seeking protection from the devastating effects of progressive bone loss, the condition known as osteoporosis. However, a recent study points to a potentially dangerous consequence of taking calcium supplements – a 30% increase in risk for suffering a heart attack. Scientists reached this conclusion after performing a combined analysis of 8,000 patients from five previous studies (a method known as meta-analysis). Men and women were equally vulnerable to the increased risk for heart attack. Age didn't seem to matter much either.

The findings were more than a bit unexpected since earlier scientific evidence supported the idea that higher levels of dietary calcium intake were actually heart-protective. But the devil is always in the details and savvy health consumers quickly come to appreciate subtle distinctions. *Dietary calcium intake* (how much calcium you get from the food you eat) is not the same as *total calcium intake* (how much calcium you get from food plus taking supplements). The new study was placing blame on taking calcium supplements, not calcium you get in food.

So, are all of us who take calcium supplements really at risk? Looking more closely at the study data, the answer comes into better view. *All of the increased risk for heart attack among the folks who took calcium supplements came from those individuals who already had the highest dietary calcium intake.* Since 2005, our published research has advanced the notion that more of good things are not necessarily better. This way of thinking predicts that the health benefits of a "good thing" like calcium – an absolutely essential nutrient – will not go up and up as you consume more. If you look around, this idea holds true for a lot of things in the world. From pomegranates to Perry Como records, too much can be as bad as too little. Some years back, the philosopher Aristotle tried to spread around this idea. He taught: "Seek the Golden Middle". Not enough people listened.

Time now for a summing up. What the new research on calcium tells us is that you can expect a downside if you oversupplement with even the most essential nutrients. Our advice: Don't interpret these new findings as a warning to lower the amount of calcium you consume in your food. *Instead, focus your attention on matching your total calcium intake from diet and supplements with your individual needs.* Ask your doctor to help you estimate how much calcium you are getting in your diet so you can make a more informed decision about whether starting or continuing calcium supplements is the right advice for you.

We can only imagine what wisdom Aristotle might share on the matter: "Get as much calcium as you can – from your diet. Then judiciously tailor any supplements to your individual situation." Aristotle, of course, never said this but when it comes to cutting through the dense thicket of information on health that we all face today, a wise guy could sure come in handy.

*Source: Bolland et al, Effect of calcium supplements on risk of myocardial infarction and cardiovascular events: meta-analysis. British Medical Journal 2010; volume 341, c3691.*

The Healthy Aging Corner is prepared by health professionals and researchers at the Gerald P. Murphy Cancer Foundation in West Lafayette, IN. Look for The Healthy Aging Corner to provide a glimpse at the most recent research exploring ways we can live longer and healthier lives. Supported by the Parke County Cancer Prevention Fund of the Murphy Cancer Foundation.