

Patients at risk of calcium deficiency need help with healthy eating

With media hype around size zero, the growth in celebrity culture and our obsession with body size and body image it's easy to see how people become confused about what a healthy diet actually is these days



Leading nutritionist Nigel Denby explains more

Healthy, balanced

eating combined with regular physical activity has lost its appeal as a route to achieving a healthy weight in favour of restrictive eating where any fat containing food is a definite 'sin' and individual foods are frequently demonized as 'bad for you'.

We know that many diets made popular by celebrities and the media can be nutritionally inadequate and often promote unhealthy dieting habits like rapid weight loss, skipping meals or cutting out whole food groups, such as dairy foods. This has had a direct impact on essential nutrient intakes.

If we can persuade our patients that structured meals and nutrient (not calorie)-dense snacks

combined with daily activity can have a positive effect on their health, nutrient intake and weight loss attempts we can actually give them a more positive message to 'eat well and live well'!

As a dietitian I have been interested in micronutrient intakes for some time. I see an increasing number of women with a whole host of potentially nutrition-related problems such as low bone density and osteoporosis. Nutritional analysis often reveals calcium intakes which are woefully inadequate and eating patterns which are erratic and unstructured.

My concerns reflect trends shown in the National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2002 and 2003 which despite being seven years old still provides useful insights into nutrient status and dietary habits within population groups.

The NDNS survey findings

The data becomes disturbing if we look at the actual numbers of young women who are not meeting the RNI or Lower Reference Nutrient Intake (LRNI), see figure 2.

A substantial number of young women are unlikely to be meeting many of their micronutrient requirements such as calcium and may be showing signs of deficiency and/or be at risk of depleted body stores.

There's something about **Dairy**



Sharing smiles



This is even more concerning when we consider these women are the next generation of mothers who are likely to pass on their eating habits to their children when lifelong food preferences are established in the first few years of life.

In my experience a huge number of women worry that snacking on dairy foods and including them with main meals is bad for them. The guilt and concern about dairy foods causing weight gain is unfounded and countless studies show the benefits of dairy foods to bone health and as a source of protein. As health professionals it's our role to provide practical advice which reassures people (and women in particular) that it's OK to eat dairy foods as part of a balanced diet.

So what further, more specific advice can we offer to help more people meet their calcium requirements and stay in shape?

• Watch Your portions

Pre-portioned dairy foods like Minibabybel®, The Laughing Cow Light® triangles and Leerdammer Slices® are good sources of calcium and can also help you keep track of what you are eating.



• Look out for light options

There is a wide variety of light dairy food options available such as yoghurts, milk and cheese.

• Build nutrient dense snacks by combining food groups

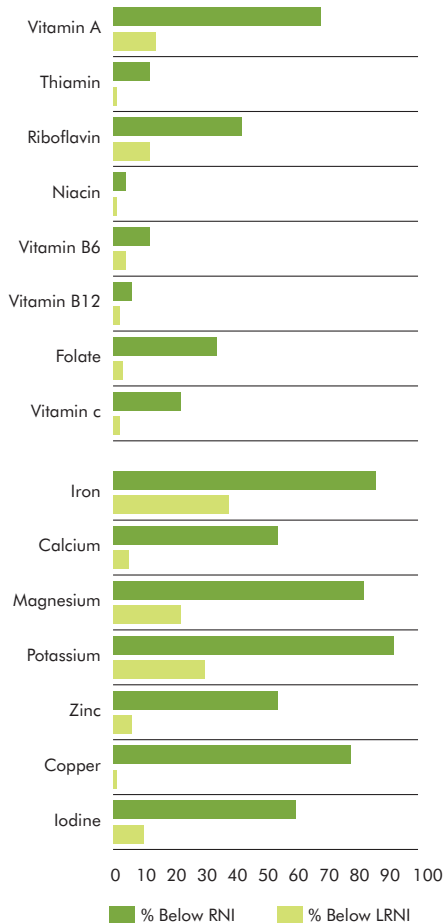
It's a smart idea to create a snack from one or more food groups, including: vegetables & fruit, starchy foods, some dairy, meat & alternatives - for example 20g cheese with 5 cherry tomatoes.

• Pack a snack

Before heading out for the day remember to pack a pre portioned cheese snack so that you aren't tempted by high calorie vending machine options. They are also conveniently portable and may help prevent you from over-eating at your next meal.



Figure 2. Summary of the percentage of women below the RNI and LRNI in the 19-24 age group for selected micronutrients



Dairy – an important part of a healthy balanced diet

The key to a healthy balanced diet is to eat a variety of foods in the right quantities and with appropriate frequency for your age, lifestyle and the amount of energy you use every day.

Some foods, like fruit and vegetables should be eaten every day in proportionately larger amounts. whilst others, like fatty and sugary foods should be eaten in smaller amounts less frequently.

The role of dairy products in a balanced diet

Dairy products such as cheese are an important part of a healthy balanced diet because they are good sources of protein, vitamin A, vitamin B12, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium and zinc. These are all important for the body's maintenance and development.

Who needs calcium?

Everyone needs calcium. Calcium is important for healthy bones, particularly during childhood and adolescence when our bones are growing and developing their maximum strength. Bone mass peaks at between 20-25 years, so it's vital we do as much as possible before then to build strength and lower the risk of bone fracture and osteoporosis in later life. As the body cannot make calcium, it is essential that sufficient amounts are taken in from the diet. The calcium in dairy foods is easy for the body to absorb. Aim for three servings of dairy foods such as cheese, milk or yogurt per day, to provide the calcium needed to build strong bones and keep them healthy.

The role of cheese

Cheese is a concentrated dairy product made from milk curds, and has been consumed as part of the human diet for thousands of years.

As with all other dairy products, cheese naturally contains many nutrients including calcium, phosphorus, protein, fat soluble vitamins and B vitamins.

Cheese is one of the most versatile, economical and nutritious foods consumed within our diet, providing a delicious and healthy snack when served with crackers, bread, fruit or vegetables.

Cheese also helps keep teeth healthy. Not only does it provide the calcium and other important minerals for their formation, but it protects against tooth decay and erosion of enamel.

Portion control

If you or your patients are concerned about fat, you don't need to avoid cheese, but keep a check on how much you eat and how often. Watch your portion size, use a measured portion like Mini Babybel® or look for light versions. These contain at least the same amount of protein and calcium as full-fat versions but just contain less fat.

The Laughing Cow®Light, for example, is deliciously smooth and creamy, yet has only 7% fat, while The Laughing Cow®Extra Light, with only 3% fat, is even better. MiniBabybel® and Leerdammer® are also available in light variants.

Energy and nutrients

Young children have small stomachs that fill up quickly, so they need full-fat dairy products to give them the energy they require.

Cutting out dairy products without careful substitution means children could be missing out on important nutrients like calcium.

Fat *or* Fiction

Milk and dairy products are often included in lists of foods to avoid or eliminate as they are often associated with being high in fat and in particular saturated fat. There is also a misconception that consumption of dairy products can make you fat.

Cheese does contain fat and salt. The amounts may look a lot per 100g when compared with other foods, but remember the quantity which you eat is relatively small - for example, a single Mini Babybel® weighs only 20g and brings only 5g fat: (or 2.4g for Mini Babybel Light®). Likewise, a Leerdammer Light Slice® is only 25g and contains less than 5g of fat.

This compares favourably with foods which are much higher in fat, for example there are 12g of fat in the average 40g chocolate bar or 35g packet of crisps.

Numerous studies have also shown that calcium, and in particular calcium from dairy products, may contribute to weight loss by helping to breakdown body fat. Some studies have found that people who consume milk and dairy foods are likely to be slimmer than those who do not.

