



Calcium can help kids cut body fat

The increasing prevalence of overweight and obese children has health professionals waving red flags about a growing national health epidemic. If the trend is not reversed, a growing number of people are at risk of living lives cursed with serious health problems. Besides the ultimate pain and suffering, there are great concerns about medical treatment that will burden the country with greater health-care costs.

Researchers are steadily narrowing in on the major contributors to this epidemic. Some of the elements are obvious: increased food-portion sizes, more foods with concentrated calorie content and, of course, a more sedentary lifestyle.

But another element is emerging as a potentially important factor in preventing and treating the problem: dietary calcium.

Question: What is the evidence regarding calcium?

Answer: One research project was designed to see if adding 2 cups of yogurt to the daily diet of African-American men would

decrease their blood pressure. It did -- but something else happened. Without any obvious change in calorie intake, after 12 months the average participant lost about 11 pounds. Based on the way fat cells work, there is evidence that increased calcium intake causes fat cells to make and store less fat and to release more.

Q: How important is calcium intake compared with calorie intake?

A: One study on overweight adults found that those consuming a daily diet with 1,300 calories and 1,500 mg of calcium for 16 weeks lost 12 pounds more than a group eating 800 calories per day with only 500 mg of calcium. Certainly, calorie intake is a major part of fat gain and loss. But all things being equal, it appears that low calcium intake makes it more difficult to lose fat.

Q: Is calcium intake a factor in child obesity?

A: A study in the December issue of the Journal of the American Dietetic Association indicates that calcium does affect the ac-

cumulation of body fat in children. The study monitored dietary and lifestyle habits of 25 boys and 27 girls from infancy to age 8. Some major factors associated with greater body fat included high-fat diets and low levels of activity. But, like adults, children who consumed more calcium were more likely to have less body fat.

Q: What are the best ways to incorporate more high-calcium foods into the diet of children?

A: Milk and milk products such as yogurt are obvious choices. Other good choices include calcium-fortified soy milk, orange juice and other foods with added calcium.

Q: How much calcium is enough?

A: Children age 1 to 3 need 500 mg per day; 4- to 8-year-olds need 800. Kids over 8 and teens need 1,300 mg per day.

Q: How much is too much?

A: The upper limit for people over age 1 is 2,500 mg per day. Too much can cause nausea, constipation, kidney stones and other problems.

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