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# Extra calcium keeps older women's bones strong, study finds

BOSTON (AP) – A new study provides some of the strongest evidence yet that extra calcium keeps women's bones strong after menopause.

The study should erase doubts about the benefits of calcium supplements, experts say.

The study, conducted in New Zealand, found that older women who took 1,000 milligrams of calcium a day in addition to what they were getting in their food reduced their bone loss by one-third to one-half.

Women typically lose bone density after menopause, increasing their risk of fractures.

There has been a growing belief for several years that taking extra calcium slows this bone loss. But skeptics remain, in part

because some studies failed to show a benefit.

However, an editorial published with the latest study in today's *New England Journal of Medicine* said it is time to recommend calcium for all older women.

"Although we do not know everything we would like to know about this issue, we know enough to act now," wrote Dr. Robert Heaney of Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.

He noted that even a 20 per cent reduction in the rate of hip fractures would mean 40,000 to 50,000 fewer of these breaks in the United States each year. This alone would save between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion in medical bills and prevent much suffering.

Heaney said it "seems prudent" to encourage women to take both calcium and vitamin D – which also probably protects bones

– "without waiting for more information."

He said women should take at least 1,000 milligrams of calcium a day and preferably 1,500 milligrams, and they should take between 400 and 800 international units of vitamin D.

The latest study was directed by Dr. Ian Reid of the University of Auckland and conducted on 122 women at least three years after they had gone through menopause.

The women were already getting about 750 milligrams of calcium a day in their diet, about 50 per cent more than U.S. women typically consume.

Half were randomly chosen to take an additional 1,000 milligrams daily, while the rest got dummy pills but continued getting 750 milligrams.

**REFERENCE:** Reid, I.R., Ames, R.W., Evans, M.C., Gamble, G.D. and S.J. Sharpe: Effect of calcium supplementation on bone loss in postmenopausal women. *New Engl. J. Med.* **328**(#7): 460-464 (1993); see also the editorial on pages 503-505. [DC Library call number: PER R11.B7]

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