

Radical call to stop calcium supplements

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WIDESPREAD use of calcium supplements to prevent fractures is no longer appropriate, according to a controversial analysis that has been questioned by Australian experts.

Based on a meta-analysis of unpublished data, researchers from the Bone and Joint Research Group at the University of Auckland said calcium supplements increased the risk of myocardial infarction and stroke by about 25% and 15–20% respectively.

In an article published by *Australian Prescriber*, Professor Ian Reid and colleagues said the co-administration of vitamin D did not mitigate the risks.

They also said calcium and vitamin D supplements were not always necessary for bisphosphonates to be effective. However, they acknowledged the supplements did prevent fractures in institutionalised elderly women.

“For the majority of patients, the weak effects that calcium supplements have on fracture risk are outweighed by the increased cardiovascular risk. PAGE 4 ►

Calcium supplements questioned

◀ PAGE 1 Recommendations for the widespread use of calcium supplements are no longer appropriate and should be reconsidered,” they said.

Endocrinologist Professor Markus Seibel, president-elect of the Australian and New Zealand

Bone and Mineral Society, said most experts would disagree with that statement in the context of evidence-based osteoporosis treatment.

“On the basis of the data we have, we cannot totally exclude that calcium supplements at high doses may, in certain sub-groups of patients, have an adverse effect on cardiovascular health,” he said. “But that effect, if it really exists, must be very small because despite numerous studies, there

has been no unequivocal signal.”

Meanwhile, a strategy on osteoporosis prevention, published in an *MJA Open* supplement sponsored by Osteoporosis Australia, said calcium supplements may be beneficial for general health as well as reducing fracture risk in people not getting enough in their diet. Supplementation should be limited to 50–600mg per day.

Osteoporosis Australia medical and scientific committee member, Professor Robin Daly of Deakin

University, questioned the methodology of the Auckland analysis and said it was too early to say everyone should stop taking calcium.

“We would still maintain that the data is inconclusive about whether there are really adverse effects from taking calcium supplements,” he said.

He said he was still giving calcium supplements to patients with deficiency.

The Heart Foundation’s cardiovascular health director, Dr Rob

Grenfell, said the foundation was not at this stage advising against supplementation. Doctor and patient should make a decision based on the patient’s fracture risk, he said.

The latest RACGP Red Book warns GPs to exercise caution with calcium supplementation in light of controversial level II evidence of increased cardiovascular risk in postmenopausal women. ■

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