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YOUR GUIDE TO LIVING WELL

BONES NEED MAGNESIUM AS MUCH AS CALCIUM

By Ceci Morfin

Move over, calcium — there's another kid on the mineral block. Magnesium is rising in rank in the fight against osteoporosis and other health problems. It might not just be calcium that you need, but more magnesium to help the body absorb dietary calcium into your bone tissue.

Magnesium's importance in body functions and overall health is garnering more attention from doctors and nutritional experts. Current evidence shows that in addition to its role in bone density, magnesium may play an important part in regulating blood pressure and in preventing heart disease and stroke. It has also been found to regulate glucose levels in diabetics.

"Magnesium in its own right is a very important mineral," says Dr. Christi Bonds, a Reno physician who integrates Western and Eastern medicine in her family practice. "We're learning more and more about it and the recommended daily allowance is now raised up to over 300 milligrams per day." Suggested daily amounts vary by age and gender.

Refined foods

Magnesium is needed for biochemical reactions in every cell in the body and is located primarily in bones, tissues and organs. Magnesium is found in foods such as leafy green vegetables, legumes, whole grains and nuts. Health experts suggest that people ob-



Photo by Richard Stokes

A few foods containing magnesium include green leafy vegetables, legumes, whole grains and nuts.

tain their daily magnesium from a healthy diet.

In the typical American diet of refined foods, though, it may be impossible to reach the recommended daily amount through food alone.

A nutritional supplement might ward off some of the symptoms of magnesium deficiency, which can include muscle cramps and twitches, premenstrual bloating, blood pressure changes and irregular heart beat.

"Very often patients that have cardiac palpitations are just lacking magnesium," says Dr. John Burton, a Reno

pharmacist and certified clinical nutritionist. "Magnesium is a smooth muscle relaxant. That's why it helps people sleep."

Since magnesium is necessary to metabolize calcium, many good supplements combine it with calcium and other nutrients needed for bone health. But not all supplements are created equally.

Calcium's partner

"Magnesium and calcium work hand-in-hand to complement one another in the body," Burton says. "What

happens to women is they get their bone density studies done and discover they're starting to lose bone. Women faithfully go out and buy calcium, go back to the doctor seven to nine months later and find they're still losing bone." Burton explains that this is because calcium taken on its own, without magnesium and vitamin D, is not absorbed into the bones. The problem is further complicated since stomach acid, needed to dissolve calcium, typically decreases in people over 50.

"Certain types (of calcium) don't dissolve as easily as others — they

need stomach acid," Burton says. "Patients need calcium citrate with magnesium and Vitamin D in the right ratio. It's the only way I sell it."

Both women and men need calcium, magnesium

Bonds says that both women and men need calcium and magnesium, even though post-menopausal women suffer the vast majority of osteoporosis cases.

"The breakdown and rebuilding of bone is a natural process that our bodies have been doing our whole lives. In osteoporosis, the breakdown process is busier than the build-up and results in a net bone loss," says Bonds. "Drug therapies focus on slowing down the breakdown process. Natural therapies work at building bone and to prevent more bone loss."

For those needing help in navigating the confusing maze of health supplements, experts like Burton and Bonds consult with clients to design personal plans to support health and help prevent conditions such as osteoporosis. Since dietary supplements can potentially interact with medications, seek professional advice before starting any new health program.

Magnesium in the diet does not pose a health risk, according to the National Institutes of Health, but high doses can result in diarrhea. Toxicity can occur in elderly people or anyone with declining kidney function and is especially associated with large doses of magnesium-containing laxatives.