

# Calcium supplements found to be risky

Five percent of Americans take these potentially lead-heavy pills every day

CHICAGO (AP) — Many over-the-counter calcium supplements that millions take to keep bones strong contain small amounts of lead that could be a health risk if recommended doses are exceeded, new research suggests.

Though manufacturers have reduced the lead content since the debate first surfaced several years ago, the authors say they re-examined the issue because doctors are increasingly recommending calcium supplements to menopausal women and other patients to prevent osteoporosis.

About 5 percent of the U.S. population takes the supplements, including a sizable number of menopausal women, who face an increased risk of osteoporosis as their bodies stop producing estrogen. About 10 million Americans suffer from the bone-thinning disease.

Calcium is often mined from ancient seabeds that also may contain

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— Dr. Robert Heaney  
Creighton University

lead, which in high doses can damage the nerves, blood cells and digestive system, causing such problems as irritability, fatigue, vomiting, convulsions and permanent brain damage.

However, the authors say their findings suggest supplements are generally safe and beneficial unless taken in larger-than-recommended doses for many years.

The authors tested 23 products in March; their results appear in Wednesday's *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The authors found no detectable level of lead in 15 of the supplements. The remainder had from 1.74 micrograms to 3.43 micrograms per 1,500 milligrams of calcium. The dose generally recommended to help prevent osteoporosis is about 1,200 milligrams to 1,500 milligrams daily.

Experts have suggested that the body's total daily exposure to lead should not exceed 6 micrograms, said Dr. Edward Ross, a University of

Florida nephrologist who conducted the study with toxicology experts at the school's Gainesville campus.

An editorial in the same issue, by a medical consultant for many calcium suppliers, says the industry has made great strides in getting lead out of supplements and criticizes the authors for sounding an unnecessary alarm.

"A backlash against calcium supplements — evoked by a lead scare — would unquestionably do far more harm ... than would continued ingestion of current supplements," Dr. Robert Heaney of Creighton University said in the editorial.

Heaney also is a spokesman for the National Osteoporosis Foundation, an advocacy group that seeks to reduce the prevalence of osteoporosis. The foundation promotes the use of calcium supplements when food intake of the mineral is inadequate.

Though the issue prompted a

widely publicized 1997 California lawsuit that forced one manufacturer to reduce the lead in its products, many consumers remain unaware of the potential exposure.

"I'm just taking this because I'm old and I was told to for my bones and osteoporosis," said Eileen Booth by, 53, of Nevada City, Calif. "Now I have to go home and look on the back of my bottle."

Makers of the dietary supplements are not required to list lead content, and Ross said some advertise their products as being lead-free even when they contain small amounts of lead.

Ross said the findings should prod manufacturers into either further reducing lead content or listing the amount on the label.

A spokeswoman for Leiner Health Products Group, the manufacturer involved in the California case, said she hadn't seen the study and would not comment.

## More than strong bones

According to a study published Wednesday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the small amounts of lead contained in many calcium supplements could, in excessive doses, pose a health risk.

*U.S. retail sales of minerals, in millions of dollars*

1999	Calcium \$624
Magnesium	\$133
Chromium	\$120
Zinc	\$109
Selenium	\$76
Potassium	\$68
Iron	\$65
Others	\$55

Note: Others include silica, manganese, boron, choline, iodine, phosphorous and copper.

Source: Nutrition Business Journal

### Scenes of Technology

#### New antibiotic for pneumonia ready

TORONTO (AP) — A new family of bacteria killers on the horizon for pneumonia and other diseases should offer an alternative to standard antibiotics that have lost their punch because germs are growing resistant.

Medicines called macrolides are a standard treatment for many bacterial infections that

cause respiratory diseases. They include such antibiotic warhorses as erythromycin. However, bugs like strep and staph are growing resistant to them, as well as to the primary backup medicines, known as quinolones.

The drug industry's latest salvo are the ketolidides. They are derived from the macrolides, but they are chemically different, so they will kill bacteria that are resistant to macrolides.

## Honey bees may hold key to curb alcoholism

STILLWATER, Okla. (AP) — Honey bees and humans have at least one thing in common: They both drink alcohol, and researchers want to know whether the insects can be used to test drugs designed to curb alcoholism.

Some animals have to be injected or tricked into consuming alcohol, but not bees. In studies, honey bees harnessed on a small metal holder consumed solutions with various levels of ethanol.

"We can even get them to drink pure ethanol, and I know of no organism that drinks pure

ethanol, not even a college student," said Charles Abramson, a comparative psychologist at Oklahoma State University.

Research could determine within a few months whether bees are suitable subjects that would allow drug companies to use fewer vertebrates in the first line of drug testing, Abramson said.

Abramson, assistant Gina Fellows from the University of Hertfordshire in England and other students have begun giving bees the drug Antabuse, which makes alcoholics sick when they drink in order to curb consumption.

The drug is administered gradually to bees, allowing them to stop.

"It looks like it does have an [effect] on the bees," Abramson said.

Tests have been limited to the lab, but the team has begun conducting experiments in a more natural setting, with bees living in a hive atop a university building. The bees are trained to come down to a third-floor window to drink and are marked for observation before buzzing away.

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