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Bone appetit!

FOOD is a gastronomic treat for many of us, but more importantly, food is the fuel for life. However, many don't know that our bones are alive, and it needs food to keep living too.

While we walk, skip and run, our bone is also actively breaking down and rebuilding itself. So just as we need food to keep going, bone also needs to refuel itself with the necessary nutrients. And calcium and vitamin D are equivalent to a gourmet spread for bones.

"Calcium is not only important for bone formation but is also used for bodily functions like maintenance of nerves and muscles. The body takes calcium from bone when it runs low, so we need to constantly replenish our calcium supply in order to avoid this," says Dr Winnie Chee, a dietitian and honorary secretary of Osteoporosis Awareness Society of Kuala Lumpur.

According to Dr Chee, calcium consumption should be in accordance with your daily recommended intake. Different age groups have different needs for calcium. How to know how much you need per day? These are the recommended nutrient intakes for calcium:

- infant 0-6 months – 300mg (breastfed); 400mg (not breastfed)
- infant six-12 months – 400mg
- children one to three years – 500mg

- children four to six years – 600mg
- children seven to nine years – 700mg
- adolescent 10-18 years – 1000mg
- men 19-65 years – 800mg
- men >65 years – 1000mg
- women 19-50 years – 800mg
- women >50 years – 1000mg
- pregnancy – 1000mg
- lactating – 1000mg

Source: National Coordinating Committee on Food and Nutrition, Ministry of Health, Malaysia

For adults, you need around 800mg to 1000mg of calcium daily. It sounds daunting, right? But drinking one glass of milk (240ml) every morning is already contributing about 250mg to 500mg of your daily calcium intake. And milk is not the only source of calcium out there.

The Osteoporosis Awareness Society of Kuala Lumpur has released the *Healthy Bone For Life Family Guidebook*. The book covers information about bones, nutrition and exercise tips, fall prevention, and also osteoporosis treatment.

“You can also find calcium in foods like green, leafy vegetables like kai lan and Chinese pak choy, soy-based products like tofu and taufu fah, and also edible, soft-boned fish like canned sardine and anchovies,” says Dr Chee.

Dr Chee adds, “There are also non-dairy, calcium-fortified foods you can find in the market today. Many orange juice beverages, malted drinks, and yoghurt drinks, not to mention breakfast cereals, biscuits, and breads are fortified with calcium nowadays. So you are definitely spoilt for choice when it comes to choosing your calcium-rich foods.”

But where does vitamin D come in?

“Vitamin D helps your bone absorb more calcium,” Dr Chee explains. “Your body produces vitamin D when exposed to sunlight. However, the ability to synthesise vitamin D in the skin decreases with age, limited exposure to the sun, and the use of sunscreens. Therefore, spending a few minutes under direct sunlight every day is advisable to enable vitamin D production.”

But remember, it’s not just about calcium and vitamin D. Other nutrients also contribute to good bone health. Besides, eating just one type of dish is boring anyway, right? So whet your appetite with delicious and well-balanced meals every day by referring to the food guide pyramid.

“Grains should form the base of your diet. Include sources such as rice, bread and cereals and go for calcium-fortified ones which are good for bones. Then work your way up the pyramid by eating five servings of fruits and vegetables, which are beneficial for our bones,” advises Dr Chee.

“Bone is always breaking down and rebuilding itself in a process called bone remodeling. But as we go past the age of 50, bone breakdown, or resorption, happens faster than bone formation. Studies have shown that individuals who eat a lot of fruits and vegetables in their diet have slower rate of bone loss and less osteoporotic fractures.

“Next on the pyramid menu is protein-rich foods like meat, fish, poultry and legumes. Two to three servings a day is enough for your daily needs. And of course, complement your healthy meals with one to two servings of dairy products like milk and cheese everyday for a calcium boost. Finally, try keeping sugar, salt, fat and oil to a bare minimum,” Dr Chee explains.

Dr Chee also advises against over-consumption of salt and caffeine. According to her, high intakes of salt and caffeine can increase loss of calcium in the urine, and this will have to be replaced by drawing out calcium from its “savings” – your bones!

The most important thing to remember is to avoid overindulgence. Like everything in life, practice moderation so that you get enough to meet your needs without risking unnecessary side effects.

Weight issues also play a part in caring for your bones. Maintain a healthy body weight status because malnutrition can affect not only your health but your bones as well. Stay away from unhealthy eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. It’s unhealthy and it takes away all the pleasures of eating good food from you.

Who knows that taking care of your bones is so enjoyable, right? You feed yourself tasty, nutritious food and you can care for your bones at the same time! And it all begins with the awareness that your bones need feeding, just like any other living thing.

In conjunction with World Osteoporosis Day Carnival, OASKL has released the *Healthy Bone For Life Family Guidebook* with the tagline “Osteoporosis prevention begins today”. The book covers information about bones, nutrition and exercise tips, fall prevention, and also osteoporosis treatment. This book will be given free to the public when you make a donation of RM10 or more to OASKL. Cheques are to be made payable to Osteoporosis Awareness Society of Kuala Lumpur. To place your order, please contact Tel: (03) 5630 0791 or (03) 5630 1668.

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