

Calcium & Dairy May Increase Prostate Cancer Risk

Study finds high intakes of dairy products and calcium may increase risk of prostate cancer.

A recent study suggests that high intake of dairy products, and calcium in particular, may increase the risk of prostate cancer. Researchers documented 1,012 cases of prostate cancer found among 20,885 male physicians who had completed a dietary questionnaire in 1983 and were followed for eleven years. The researchers looked mainly at the consumption of cereal, whole and skim milk, cheese, and ice cream in evaluating dairy and calcium intake. Information on calcium supplement use was not collected.

Men who consumed the most dairy (>2.5 servings) and calcium (>600 mg/day) had nearly 30% higher risk of prostate cancer than men in the lowest categories (< ½ serving and <150 mg/day). Several, but not all, previous studies have similarly reported this possible increased risk of prostate cancer from high dairy or calcium consumption.

Researchers suggest that calcium itself is unlikely to influence prostate cancer development directly, but that calcium can suppress the production of Vitamin D in the blood. Laboratory studies indicate that high blood levels of vitamin D may protect against prostate cancer, but studies in humans are conflicting.

While this study does show that high intake of dairy products and calcium from dairy products are associated with increased risk of prostate cancer, the researchers did point out that they did not evaluate protein or fat intake, which may also have an impact on cancer risk and confound the findings. Also, the researchers suggest that it is possible that some other component of dairy foods, not only calcium, may play a role in increasing risk.

The study findings give further information in evaluating dietary risk factors for chronic diseases like prostate cancer. While the association between high dairy or calcium intake and prostate cancer risk is not yet conclusive, the researchers propose that the conclusions can send a note of caution to Americans about the current level of enthusiasm toward very high intakes of calcium through foods or supplements.

References:

Chan, JM, Stampfer, MJ, Ma, J, Gann, PH, Gaziano, JM, Giovannucci, EL. (2001). Dairy Products, Calcium, and Prostate Cancer Risk in the Physicians' Health Study. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 74 549-554.