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Tofu: a good source of calcium for babies and children

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The best sources of calcium in plant-based diets are green vegetables rich in calcium and low in oxalate (as oxalate binds to calcium and impairs absorption). These green vegetables (broccoli, kale, spring greens, cavolo nero, Brussels sprouts, pak choi...) provide not only calcium but also many other nutrients and health benefits and should be part of our daily diet.

However parents usually struggle to get their children to eat green veggies and frequently become over-anxious about it. Forcing or bribing our kids to eat vegetables - or any other kind of food - is almost always ineffective and can even be counter-productive. A much better strategy is to keep serving a wide variety of green vegetables at meal times, but without pressuring our children to eat them. We do not need to give any positive or negative reinforcement; we just need to offer these foods consistently and of course eat them ourselves! Sooner or later our children will become curious, will start trying these foods and will end up liking them. Every child needs their own time, so be patient.

In the meantime, how can we make sure that our children are getting all the calcium they need?

Breast milk (or formula milk if breast milk is not available) provides enough calcium for babies younger than one year therefore they do not need any other source of this nutrient. However as children start eating more solid foods and less milk we will have to introduce other calcium-rich foods in their diets. Calcium-fortified plant milks are always a good option as they provide as much calcium as cow's milk, with a similar rate of absorption. The best plant milk for children, especially for those younger than 5 years, is soya milk, as it is also high in protein and other nutrients. Calcium-fortified, low-sugar oat and almond milks can be a valid alternative for those children who do not like or cannot have soya milk. Fortified plant-based yoghurts are another good option. Legumes are also a good source of calcium.

There are two main brands of tofu that can be found in most supermarket chains: Cauldron and Tofoo. Both are high quality organic and provide the same amount of protein: 12.5 g /100 g. The main difference is their calcium content: Cauldron uses *calcium sulphate* as a coagulant and as a result Cauldron tofu provides 400 mg of calcium / 100 g. This covers 90% of the requirements of children between 4 and 6 years and 50% of the requirements of female teenagers. Tofoo uses *nigari* and their tofu has much lower calcium content: 87 mg /100g. This is still a good amount and for people who eat a diet rich in green vegetables, legumes and other calcium-rich foods can be enough. However for babies and young children it is preferable to use tofu prepared with calcium sulphate in order to optimise their calcium intake. Taifun is also a high calcium organic tofu sold in Waitrose and Planet Organic.

Some people prefer to buy their tofu in Asian stores, where tofu is usually cheaper. Many of the tofu brands sold at these stores include calcium sulphate - look at the list of ingredients (*sometimes it is shown as the food additive E516*).



Adding a small portion of tofu 3-4 times a week is a very easy way to ensure that our children are meeting their calcium requirements. Calcium, protein, vitamin D, vitamin K and magnesium are essential for children and adolescents: they are the key nutrients children need in order to achieve an optimal peak bone mass in late adolescence.

Babies can start eating tofu as soon as they are six months old. A small portion (25-30 g) will be enough during the first year. Tofu is a very convenient finger food for babies: firm, but easy to chew and swallow. It can be also mixed with pureed vegetables. Tofu can be later added to stews, curries, soups, salads, and pasta or rice dishes, and can be even used to prepare desserts.