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Weekly Health Digest

Boron — A Trace Mineral for Bones & Hormones

September 3,2026

> **Primary sources:** Pizzorno, L. (2015). Nothing Boring About Boron. Integrative Medicine: A Clinician's Journal, 14(4), 35-48. | Naghii, M.R., et al. (2011). Comparative effects of daily and weekly boron supplementation on plasma steroid hormones and proinflammatory cytokines. Journal of Trace Elements in Medicine and Biology, 25(1), 54-58. | Institute of Medicine (2001), Dietary Reference Intakes: Boron. | Additional context: Nielsen & Shuler (1990); Nielsen (2000); Naghii & Samman (1997); Naghii & Samman (1996); Lee, Sherins & Dixon (1978); Meacham et al. (1995); Miljkovic et al. (2004); Barranco & Eckhert (2004); Penland (1994-1998); Newnham (1991). Full citations in the attached reference file.

What Did Scientists Study?

Researchers looked at boron, a trace mineral found in fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes. One major review (Pizzorno, 2015) pulled together decades of research on boron and the body. A separate small study (Naghii et al., 2011) tested boron supplements in eight healthy men over one week. Beyond these two, a wider body of work stretching back to the 1980s has looked at how boron interacts with other minerals, hormones, bone, and even brain function - and, importantly, at what happens when animals are given very high doses.

Why Does It Matter?

Most Americans get very little boron from food, only about 1 to 1.35 milligrams a day. Some scientists think that is on the low side for supporting strong bones and healthy hormone levels, especially for people who do not eat many fruits and vegetables. But like any nutrient, more is not automatically better, and boron does not yet have an official, research-based safe upper limit.

What Did They Find?

In the small human study, men who took 10 milligrams of boron a day for a week saw their free testosterone rise and their estradiol drop. This was a short, small study without a placebo group, so it is an early hint rather than solid proof. A related, slightly larger study by the same research group (Naghii & Samman, 1997) gave eight men 10 milligrams of boron a day for four weeks and found the body absorbed and used most of it (about 84% was recovered in urine), while urinary calcium loss went down - a sign boron may help the body hold onto calcium rather than waste it.

The larger review found that boron may help with bone formation, wound healing, and immune function, based mostly on animal research plus scattered human data. It suggested a modest supplement of about 3 milligrams a day for people at risk of bone or joint problems, or who eat few fruits and vegetables.

The accepted safe upper limit for boron is 20 milligrams a day for adults, set by the Institute of Medicine. That conservative ceiling exists because much higher doses caused reproductive and developmental harm in animal studies, and there is no solid human safety data above it.

How Might Boron Work in the Body?

Scientists have proposed a few specific mechanisms, mostly from lab and animal research:

Bone and mineral handling. Older animal studies (Nielsen & Shuler, 1990) found that boron interacts with calcium in rats, and that this interaction changes depending on how much magnesium and potassium is in the diet. Both low boron and low calcium raised the same blood marker of bone turnover (alkaline phosphatase) and lowered calcium stored in the thigh bone, suggesting boron and calcium partly support the skeleton through overlapping pathways. A broader review of boron's role across species (Nielsen, 2000) describes it as a “dynamic” trace element that nudges the metabolism of calcium, magnesium, glucose, fats, and reactive oxygen species, generally in ways that support bone, brain, and immune health, and notes the body tightly controls blood boron levels by excreting the excess in urine rather than storing it in tissue.

Vitamin D. A 2004 paper (Miljkovic, Miljkovic & McCarty) proposed that boron may help preserve active vitamin D by slowing down the enzyme (24-hydroxylase) that breaks it down, which could partly explain boron's links to bone health. This is a proposed mechanism based on biochemical reasoning, not a clinical trial, so it should be read as a hypothesis rather than a proven effect.

Cell growth signals. Laboratory research (Barranco & Eckhert, 2004) found that boric acid slowed the growth of human prostate cancer cells in a dish, possibly by binding to a molecule (NAD+) involved in cell energy and signaling. This is a cell-culture finding, far removed from a human dietary recommendation, but it is one reason boron has drawn research interest beyond bone health.

Brain function. Human feeding studies from the 1990s (led by James Penland at the USDA) found that when healthy older adults were placed on very low-boron diets for several weeks, their brain electrical activity (measured by EEG) and their performance on attention, short-term memory, and motor-speed tasks got measurably worse, and improved again once boron was restored. These were controlled feeding studies, but small and short-term, so they point to boron mattering for brain function without pinning down an ideal daily amount.

Joint health. In the early 1990s, a researcher named Newnham proposed, based on comparing arthritis rates and soil boron levels across several countries, that low dietary boron might contribute to arthritis. This is an epidemiological hypothesis, not a controlled trial, and later researchers have treated it as suggestive rather than established.

What About Safety at Higher Doses? What the Animal Data Actually Shows

Some commentators have suggested much higher intakes of Boron may be beneficial but they have leaned heavily on animal studies to argue for much higher human doses, it's worth looking at what these animal studies actually found, in context.

A rat study (Naghii & Samman, 1996) tested a range of boron doses and found something the source article did not mention: testosterone rose at low-to-moderate doses but was lower, not higher, at the highest dose tested (25 milligrams per rat per day). In other words, the animal dose-response curve was not a straight line where more boron simply means more testosterone - it curved back down at the high end, which is a classic sign of a dose that has moved from beneficial into harmful territory. At this point we do not know if this is true for humans or not

An older toxicology study (Lee, Sherins & Dixon, 1978) pushed boron doses much further and found that sustained high-dose exposure caused testicular damage in male rats (germinal aplasia, meaning the loss of sperm-producing cells), along with other signs of reproductive toxicity. This is exactly the kind of study that regulators used, decades later, to help set the boron upper limit - it is evidence for why the ceiling exists, not evidence for exceeding it.

Human data point the same direction, at much more modest doses. A study in postmenopausal women (Meacham et al., 1995) found that boron supplementation shifted mineral metabolism (affecting calcium, copper, and magnesium handling) even at everyday intake levels, underscoring that boron is metabolically active well below the high levels recommended by some.

Put together, the animal and human evidence tells a consistent story: boron looks genuinely useful in the low-single-digit-to-low-double-digit milligram range, but the relationship reverses at high doses, and the reversal shows up in the same kinds of studies (and sometimes the very same papers) that got cited to argue for going higher.

What Can You Do?

Most people get enough boron from a normal diet with fruits, vegetables, and nuts, especially almonds, raisins, prunes, and avocados. If you are curious about a supplement, the amounts that have actually been studied in humans, roughly 3 to 10 milligrams a day, are the ones with real evidence behind them, and they stay comfortably under the 20 milligram limit. There is no reliable human evidence to support taking boron at 50 milligrams a day or higher, and doing so goes beyond established safety guidance and into the dose range where animal studies show harm, not benefit.

Bottom Line

Boron is a promising, understudied trace mineral with plausible roles in bone metabolism, calcium handling, hormone balance, and even brain function. More research is needed to understand what appears to be a poorly understood element.

It is important to recognize that the dose-response relationship is not a straight line: benefits appear at modest doses, and the same body of research that hints at those benefits also shows real harm at high doses. “More is better” is not supported by the evidence. Stick to food sources or modest, well-studied supplement doses, and talk with your doctor before starting any new supplement.

Definitions

Boron: A trace mineral found in plant foods like fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes. It is not officially classified as essential for humans, but research suggests it plays a role in bone and hormone health. Wikipedia

Trace mineral: A mineral the body needs only in very small amounts to function properly, unlike minerals like calcium that are needed in much larger amounts. Wikipedia

Testosterone: The main male sex hormone. It supports muscle mass, bone strength, and energy levels in both men and women, though at much higher levels in men. Wikipedia

Estradiol: A form of estrogen, a hormone involved in reproductive health in both women and men. Levels that are too high or too low can affect overall health. Wikipedia

Tolerable Upper Intake Level (UL): The highest daily amount of a nutrient that is unlikely to cause harm in almost everyone. Going above it regularly raises the risk of side effects. Wikipedia

Vitamin D: A vitamin the body makes from sunlight (and gets from some foods) that helps absorb calcium and keep bones strong. An enzyme called 24-hydroxylase breaks down active vitamin D when the body has enough of it. Wikipedia

NAD+: A molecule found in every cell that helps convert food into usable energy and helps regulate many other cell processes, including how and when cells grow. Wikipedia

EEG (electroencephalogram): A test that measures the brain's electrical activity using sensors placed on the scalp. Researchers use it to study how diet, sleep, or other factors affect brain function. Wikipedia

Germinal aplasia: A toxic effect in which the cells responsible for producing sperm are damaged or destroyed. In animal studies, it is one of the signs used to identify a dose of a substance that is too high to be safe. Wikipedia

Dose-response relationship: How the effect of a substance changes as the amount (dose) changes. Many nutrients help at low-to-moderate doses but cause harm at high doses, producing a curve rather than a straight line. Wikipedia