

Vitamins, Minerals and Supplements: Do You Need to Take Them?



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Most of us know that good nutrition is important for good health. However, when we hear buzzwords such as "calcium deficiency" or learn that a new multivitamin just hit the shelves, it can make us wonder if the food we're eating is enough. Hint: It likely is.

Taking a daily dose of any of the single minerals, vitamins or multivitamin/mineral supplements that line the shelves of supermarkets and drug stores can be tempting. According to the 2015 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, "Nutritional needs should be met primarily from foods. Individuals should aim to meet their nutrient needs through healthy eating patterns that include nutrient-dense foods ... [which] contain essential vitamins and minerals and also dietary fiber and other naturally occurring substances that may have positive health effects." While there may be a need to supplement our diet at certain times in our lives, the safety of taking a supplement also needs to be considered. Too much of some vitamins and minerals can cause health issues; and, therefore, recommended levels should not be exceeded.

Who needs supplements?

As it turns out, the best way to stay healthy is to choose a wide variety of nutritious foods from all five MyPlate food groups. Nutrient deficiencies are not common among Americans, but for varying

reasons some people cannot reach the recommended nutrient amounts without using supplements and/or including fortified foods. In addition to a balanced diet, those individuals may need nutrient supplements depending on their situation. For example, older adults, pregnant women and people who are food insecure are at increased risk of nutrient deficiencies.

In addition, if you are eating less than 1,600 calories each day because you have a poor appetite or you have trouble eating because you have been using alcohol or drugs, discuss the need for supplements with your doctor or registered dietitian nutritionist.

Some individuals are limited in their food choices due to allergies, a medical condition or because they are following a vegetarian or vegan diet. For example, animal foods are the main source of vitamin B12, so people who follow a vegan diet need to eat fortified foods and/or take a supplement.

Women who could become pregnant need to obtain adequate folic acid from fortified foods (cereals and other grains), supplements or both, in addition to consuming folate from foods in a varied diet. Because it helps reduce the risk of some birth defects, folic acid is very important during childbearing years. If lab tests show that a woman's iron status is low during pregnancy, her healthcare provider will recommend an iron supplement.

Vitamin D might be a concern among infants, children and young adults. Infants who are breast-fed and children who consume less than the recommended amount of vitamin D fortified milk or formula and those with increased risk of deficiency likely will need supplemental vitamin D. Adolescent girls, meanwhile, might need additional iron.

On the other side of the spectrum, as people age it can be difficult to get enough vitamins B12 and D. Luckily, this is one of the cases where supplements can make a difference. Getting B12 from fortified foods or taking it alone or as part of a multivitamin/mineral can help raise B12 in your blood. If you're taking calcium or a multivitamin/mineral, choose one that also has vitamin D.

Other groups who may require additional supplementation include people who are taking certain medications or have a health condition that changes how their body uses nutrients, and individuals who have been told by their doctor they have a specific nutrient deficiency.

Your doctor can order tests to help determine if taking a supplement would benefit you. The results might show that you are low in a certain nutrient or you might discover that you're doing just fine. Additionally, review your current diet. An RDN can help you evaluate the foods you eat and make recommendations to meet your personal needs.

Remember, real food contains healthy things a pill can't give us. When we take a nutrient out of a food and concentrate it in a pill, it's not quite the same thing. Be sure to consider your individual situation and consult a doctor or an RDN before considering supplements.

Reviewed May 2018 by Taylor Wolfram, MS, RDN, LDN. Published July 6, 2018. To learn more healthy tips, visit www.eatright.org and consult a registered dietitian nutritionist. Info obtained from www.eatright.org.