

Nutritional Supplements

The word "supplement" means exactly that: a nutrient or group of nutrients (vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, fats and oils) that are meant to supplement, but not substitute for, a healthy diet that you eat on a regular basis. Supplements come in pills, capsules, powders, liquids, and even in gel form.

You probably do not need a general vitamin-mineral supplement if you are eating a reasonably varied diet most of the time, are not restricting calories to lose weight, and generally do not skip meals. Taking extra supplements will not add extra energy. If you are fatigued because of a poor diet, only better nutrition can correct this problem. Vitamins and minerals do not increase your appetite or cause weight gain. A supplement can never make up for eating poorly. A multiple vitamin mineral supplement cannot provide your needed protein, energy, carbohydrates, or fiber. Only food can give you these needed nutrients.

Some people may need to take specific supplements because of allergies, certain medical conditions, or simply the inability to obtain needed nutrients on a regular basis.

Calcium

Recommendations for daily calcium intake for young people from 19 to 24 years old are around 1200 mg. In terms of food, this means you need the equivalent of four 8-oz. servings of dairy products or calcium-fortified equivalent foods per day. Try for at least 3 servings and then add a calcium supplement. Calcium supplements are better absorbed from the intestine in the presence of lactose (the sugar of milk) and protein. Taking the calcium supplement with a glass of milk is ideal. Once the calcium is absorbed into your bloodstream, your bones will take up the calcium better in the presence of vitamin D. Almost all dairy products and many calcium supplements are fortified with vitamin D.

Other foods high in calcium that are absorbed well are calcium-fortified orange juice, tofu that is packaged in calcium brine, calcium-fortified cereals, and almonds. Easy ways to work in that extra calcium is to sprinkle cheese on your salad or baked potato, order lattes and cappuccinos if you drink coffee, or whip up a smoothie with low fat yogurt and fruit for a snack.

After your mid-20's, your bones will have reached their "peak bone mass." This means that if you are a woman, you will be carrying to menopause the density that your bones have accrued when you were much younger. Osteoporosis and bone fractures are becoming a very large problem for older women (and some men). The most important preventive measure you can do is to increase calcium intake now, along with regular "weight bearing exercise." Examples are walking, jogging, racket sports, Frisbee, and other activities in which your body weight is supported by your own bones. Working out with weight resistance exercise machines and free weights is also very helpful for increasing bone density, no matter what your age.

Iron

If you are told your iron levels are low when you have your blood tested by a health care provider, you may be told to take iron supplements for a while. Absorption of this iron will be increased if you take the iron along with an acidic food or juice (e.g., orange juice, tomato sauce, strawberries). Taking iron without food may upset the stomach. Do not take a calcium supplement at the same time as an iron supplement since calcium can interfere with the body's ability to absorb iron.

It is never advised to take iron supplements just because you "feel tired." Many things, including lack of adequate rest, depression, an imbalanced diet, effects of some medications, and several medical conditions can cause fatigue. By taking iron supplements when you are not deficient in iron, you could actually be doing more harm to your health. You might be alerted to possible iron deficiency when you try to donate blood and are turned away because of a low iron level. Always consult with a medical provider if you think you may be iron-deficient.

Vitamin C

Research has not convincingly shown that extra vitamin C is helpful in warding off colds. It may help lessen the severity of a cold, however. Extra vitamin C is recommended around the time of surgery to aid in wound healing. Heavy smokers may need as much as an extra 100 mg. of vitamin C per day.

Taking high amounts of vitamin C over a very long period of time can actually lead to "rebound scurvy," the deficiency disease of vitamin C. This is because the body can adapt to these extremely high levels. When one resumes a more normal intake, the body thinks it is then in a deficiency state. Babies born to mothers who consume these very high levels during pregnancy sometimes develop this rebound scurvy after birth.

Folate

There has been recent concern that all women of childbearing age get adequate folate (a B vitamin) in their diets to prevent some types of birth defects. Folate is also linked to heart disease prevention and may help prevent depression. Folate is easily found in foods such as dried beans and legumes, dark green leafy vegetables (spinach, kale, broccoli), and orange juice.

PROTEIN POWDER SUPPLEMENTS

Much of this high level of protein is actually converted to carbohydrates and fats in the body. Too much extra protein can put a burden on the kidneys, be dehydrating, and can cause calcium loss from the body. Your protein needs are usually met quite easily by a slight increase of protein in the diet.

HERBAL SUPPLEMENTS

There are no federal regulations that standardize quality of ingredients contained in herbal supplements. There is no assurance that what is stated on a supplement label even resembles what you are getting. There is often very little information on food-herbal, drug-herbal, and multiple herbal-herbal interactions. Women who are pregnant or breast-feeding should not use any dietary supplement without the advice of their health care provider.

RESOURCES

Sarubin, Allison, MS, RD, The Health Professional's Guide to Popular Dietary Supplements. The American Dietetic Association., Chicago. 2000.

Foster, Steven, and Varro E. Tyler, Ph.D., Tyler's Honest Herbal. A Sensible Guide to the Use of Herbs and Related Remedies. 4th Ed. Haworth Herbal Press, New York. 1999.

LINKS

Food and Drug Administration
<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/ds-faq.html>

Office of Dietary Supplements
<http://ods.od.nih.gov/>