

The Scoop On **Supplements**

Dietary supplements include a broad range of vitamins, minerals, herbs and other substances meant to improve upon your diet. They can come as pills, capsules, powders and liquids.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which regulates dietary supplements, treats them more like foods than like drugs. Dr. Paul M. Coates, director of the National Institutes of Health's Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS), says, "Dietary supplements are generally regarded as safe based on a long history of human use, unless proven otherwise. By contrast, drugs are not assumed to be safe until extensive testing has been done to prove their safety."

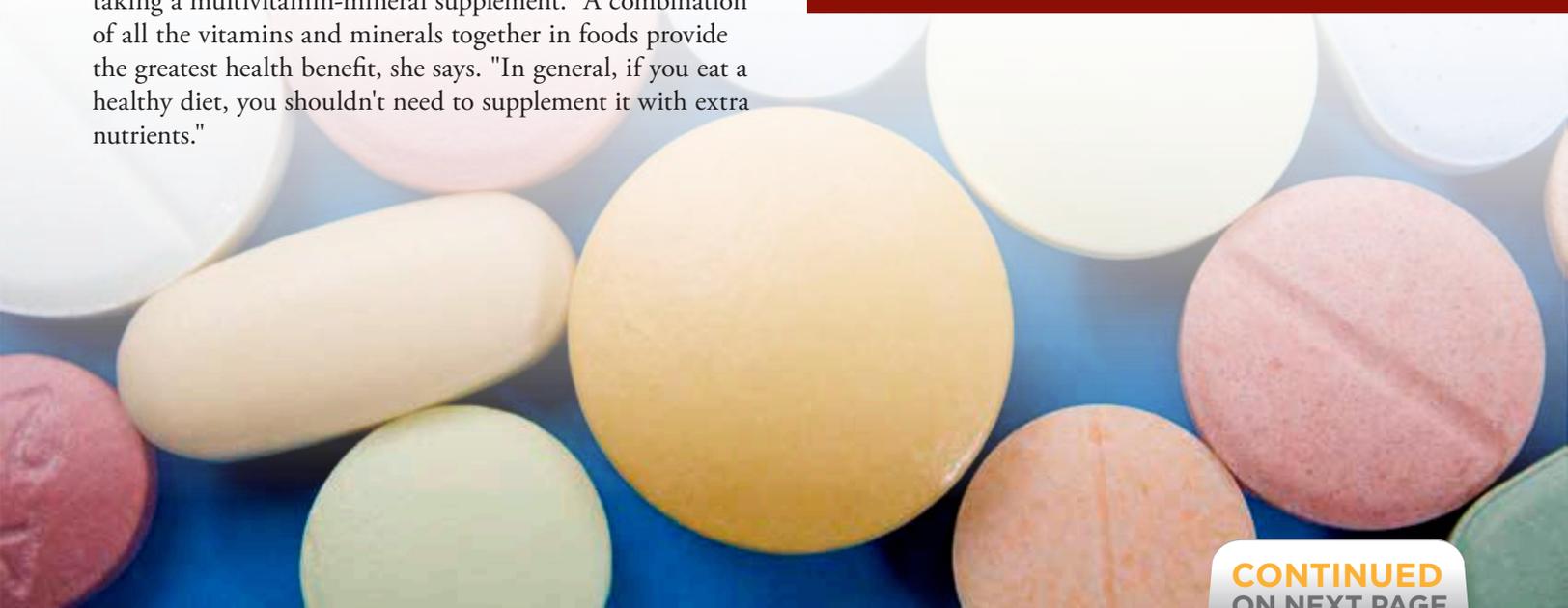
Supplements can play an important role in your health. Some doctors advise patients to take a multivitamin-mineral supplement to make sure they're getting enough of all the nutrients they need. While this may provide some insurance, Carol Haggans, a consultant with ODS, cautions, "People shouldn't feel they can make up for an unhealthy diet by taking a multivitamin-mineral supplement." A combination of all the vitamins and minerals together in foods provide the greatest health benefit, she says. "In general, if you eat a healthy diet, you shouldn't need to supplement it with extra nutrients."

Who Needs Supplements?

However, some people might need more of certain nutrients. Doctors often advise women of child-bearing age to take folic acid, for example. Many people don't get enough calcium. According to some surveys, 44% of boys and 58% of girls age 6-11 don't get enough and the numbers get even higher as people age. It's probably best to eat 2-3 servings per day of calcium-rich foods like dairy products. But if you have trouble eating dairy products because they upset your stomach and you don't get enough calcium in other foods, a supplement might help.

DO THEY WORK? SHOULD YOU BUY?

When it comes to supplements, resist the pressure to buy something on the spot. Ask a health care professional for advice or check credible sources like government web sites to find out if the product is safe and does what it says it does.



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Supplements: Know The Risks And Benefits Before You Buy

Since some supplements may help you, it's easy to go a step farther and think that taking more would be even better. This can cost a lot and may not provide the benefit you expect. It can also be risky.

Consider This...

"Almost all of the nutrients have tolerable upper intake levels—the amount it's recommended you stay under each day," Haggans says. Amounts above these levels can be toxic. Too much vitamin A, for instance, can cause birth defects, liver problems, weak bones and nervous system disorders. Too much calcium can cause kidney problems and block your ability to use other minerals in your diet.

It's not difficult to get high doses of certain nutrients, either. Breakfast cereals have long been fortified with vitamins and minerals. Now, many other fortified products are crowding onto grocery shelves as consumers buy into the idea that more is better. Look at the foods and supplements you're eating together to make sure that your total intake of any one nutrient isn't too high. If you're concerned, talk to a health care provider such as a doctor, pharmacist or registered dietitian.

In the meantime, if you're considering taking a supplement, consult with your health care provider. Some supplements can interfere with other medications, so have a list ready of all the medications and supplements you're taking or considering.

If you decide that a particular dietary supplement is right for you, make sure you're buying a reliable brand. There are independent laboratories that test supplement products for quality and purity. "There are companies whose products are made to very high standards," Dr. Coates says, "but that's not always the case."

BEFORE USING DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS

- ✓ **Safety first.** Some products can be harmful when taken in high amounts, for a long time or along with certain other substances. Don't use a dietary supplement along with, or instead of, a prescription medicine without first consulting your health care provider.
- ✓ **Don't chase the latest headline.** Sound health advice is based on research over time, not a single study touted in the media.
- ✓ **Learn to spot false claims.** If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- ✓ **"Natural" doesn't mean safe.** Natural ingredients may interact with medicines, be dangerous for people with certain health conditions or be harmful in high doses. For example, peppermint tea is generally safe to drink, but you can get a toxic dose of oil extracted from peppermint leaves.

