

Should You Take Dietary Supplements?

A Look At Vitamins, Minerals, Botanicals & More

When you reach for that bottle of vitamin C or fish oil pills, you might wonder how well they'll work and if they're safe. The first thing to ask yourself is whether you need them in the first place.

More than half of all Americans take one or more dietary supplements daily or on occasion. Supplements are available without a prescription and usually come in pill, powder or liquid form. Common supplements include vitamins, minerals and herbal products, also known as botanicals.

People take these supplements to make sure they get enough essential nutrients and to maintain or improve their health. Experts point out that it's possible to get all of the nutrients you need by eating a variety of healthy foods, but supplements can be useful for filling in gaps in your diet.

Are There Risks?

Some supplements may have side effects, especially if taken before surgery or with other medicines. Supplements can also cause problems if you have certain health conditions. And the effects of many supplements haven't been tested in children, pregnant women and other groups. So talk with your health care provider if you're thinking about taking dietary supplements.

Many supplements have mild effects with few risks. But use caution. Vitamin K, for example, will reduce the ability of blood thinners to work. Ginkgo can increase blood thinning. The herb St. John's wort is sometimes used to ease depression, anxiety or nerve pain, but it can also speed the breakdown of many drugs—such as antidepressants and birth control pills—and make them less effective.

Just because a supplement is promoted as "natural" doesn't necessarily mean it's safe. The herbs comfrey and kava, for example, can seriously damage the liver.

Are There Benefits?

Dietary supplements are regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as foods, not as drugs. The label may claim certain health benefits. But unlike medicines, supplements can't claim to cure, treat or prevent a disease. Evidence does suggest that some supplements can enhance health in different ways. The most popular nutrient supplements are multivitamins, calcium and vitamins B, C and D. Calcium supports bone health, and vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium. Vitamins C and E are antioxidants—molecules that prevent cell damage and help to maintain health.

CONTINUED
ON NEXT PAGE



(Continued from previous page)

Women need iron during pregnancy, and breastfed infants need vitamin D. Folic acid—400 micrograms daily, whether from supplements or fortified food—is important for all women of childbearing age. Vitamin B12 keeps nerve and blood cells healthy. Research suggests that fish oil can promote heart health.

The health effects of some other common supplements need more study. These include glucosamine (for joint pain) and herbal supplements such as echinacea (immune health) and flaxseed oil (digestion).

Much Still To Be Learned...

Scientists still have much to learn even about common vitamins. One recent study found unexpected evidence about vitamin E. Earlier research suggested that men who took vitamin E supplements might have a lower risk of developing prostate cancer. However, a large NIH-funded clinical trial of more than 29,000 men found that taking supplements of vitamin E actually raised—not reduced—their risk of this disease. The study's findings underscore why it's important to conduct clinical studies of supplements to confirm their effects.

Because supplements are regulated as foods, not as drugs, the FDA doesn't evaluate the quality of supplements or assess their effects on the body. If a product is found to be unsafe after it reaches the market, the FDA can restrict or ban its use.

Manufacturers are also responsible for the product's purity, and they must accurately list ingredients and their amounts. But there's no regulatory agency that makes sure that labels match what's in the bottles. You risk getting less, or sometimes more, of the listed ingredients. All of the ingredients may not even be listed.

A few independent organizations conduct quality tests of supplements and offer seals of approval. This doesn't guarantee the product works or is safe; it just assures the product was properly made and contains the listed ingredients.

Safe Use of Supplements

- Tell all of your health care providers about any dietary supplements you use. Some supplements can interact with medications or affect medical conditions.
- Read the label instructions for use.
- "Natural" doesn't always mean safe. For up-to-date news about the safety of particular supplements, check <http://nccam.nih.gov/news/alerts>.
- Too much might be harmful. Don't take more than the recommended dose.

