



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

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.

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 containing essential vitamins and minerals and also dietary fiber and other naturally occurring substances that may have positive health effects."

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. For example, older adults, pregnant women and people who are food insecure are at increased risk of nutrient deficiencies.

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.

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.

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 your doctor or an RDN before considering supplements.

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