

Should I Take a Vitamin?

The supplement aisle at your local drug or grocery store can be dizzying – so many products with vague hints at keeping you healthy and/or preventing chronic disease or colds/flu. Are vitamin supplements necessary for good health? In most cases, probably not. In fact, whole foods are better than supplements for three very specific reasons:

1. **GREATER NUTRITION:** Whole foods are very complex. One food contains many micronutrients that your body needs – not just one. For example: an orange, which is generally known for its vitamin C, also contains beta carotene, calcium, potassium and other nutrients. Taking a single “vitamin C” pill instead of eating oranges would cause you to miss out on these other important nutrients.
2. **FIBER:** Vitamin supplements don’t contain fiber, like whole foods do. Fiber has been studied for its role in preventing/controlling diabetes and heart disease. Thinking you can take a multi-vitamin instead of eating a variety of fibrous fruits and veggies? Think again.
3. **PROTECTIVE SUBSTANCES:** We are just beginning to learn about the variety of other naturally-occurring substances in foods (besides vitamins and minerals) that have positive health benefits for the body. These compounds, often called phytochemicals, may help protect you from chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer.

For most, a daily multi-vitamin is PROBABLY okay...though only a few research studies have shown an actual benefit to this practice. In fact, a more recent review of the literature surprisingly revealed some long-term risks associated with multivitamin use.

It’s important to realize that federal regulations for dietary supplements are very different than those for prescription medications. Did you know that supplement manufacturers don’t have to prove that their products are safe or effective before they are marketed? Only once the product is

on the market can the FDA monitor the products' safety, potentially making you the guinea pig! Also remember that "natural" doesn't necessarily mean "safe". There are plenty of naturally-occurring substances that cause dramatic (and sometimes dangerous) effects on the body and may interact with other medications and supplements.

That being said, there is evidence that supports the use of vitamin/mineral supplements in some situations. A doctor or dietitian can help you choose which supplements/doses are appropriate if you fall into one of the following categories or are unable to eat an adequate diet:

- Women that are pregnant, trying to get pregnant, or breastfeeding.
- Vegans or vegetarians that don't eat a variety of foods
- Those that have had surgery on the digestive tract and therefore cannot absorb nutrients properly.
- Those with a medical condition that affects how the body absorbs, uses, or excreted nutrients (chronic diarrhea, food allergies, diseases of the liver, gallbladder, intestine or pancreas)
- Post-menopausal women
- Those with poor diets or consuming less than 1600 calories/day

If you do decide to take a supplement, avoid those that provide megadoses. Look for a multivitamin-mineral product that provides around 100% of the Daily Value (DV) of all the vitamins and minerals, rather than those that have, for example, 500% of the DV for one vitamin and only 20% for another (except for calcium...if your multi has any calcium, it's not likely to provide 100% of the DV because calcium makes the pill very large and hard to swallow and in addition, it blocks the absorption of some of the other nutrients like iron).

Look for "USP" on the label. This stands for United States Pharmacopeia, the voluntary testing and auditing program that assures that supplements meet the organization's standards for strength, purity,

disintegration and dissolution.

Keep in mind that dietary supplements can lose potency over time. If a product doesn't have an expiration date, don't buy it. Make sure to throw out your expired supplements.

When considering your dose, remember that excess intakes of certain vitamins end up being spilled out into the urine (rendering them useless)...while large doses of others may lead to toxic effects such as head aches, hair loss, nail changes, liver problems (Vitamin A), nausea and diarrhea (Vitamin C), and bleeding and hemorrhagic stroke (Vitamin E).

When taking supplements, it's wise to be aware of alerts and advisories. The FDA and the National Institutes of Health keep a list of supplements that are under regulatory review or that have been reported to cause harmful effects. Check the following websites periodically for updates: www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/Alerts/ nccam.nih.gov/news/alerts.

Many people take a daily vitamin and assume they don't need to worry about what they eat. If you decide to take a vitamin/mineral supplement, it should be for EXTRA nutrition protection, not as a substitute for a balanced healthy diet.

Sources:

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/supplements/NU00198>

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wiseuse.htm#safety>

<http://www.usp.org/USPVerified/dietarySupplements/>

http://www.rd411.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=464:vitamin-toxicity-guide&catid=79:vitamins-and-minerals&Itemid=358

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