

Is a nutrition supplement right for you?

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By Eileen Beal

Whether you are 30, 60, or 90, your vitamin and mineral needs are pretty much the same.

You need vitamins—A, the B family, C, D, E, and K, and vitamin-wannabes such as beta carotene, biotin and choline—to help process the carbohydrates, proteins, fats and sugars you eat. You also need them to help keep your body functioning, your mind alert, and your immune system strong and able to protect you from germs and infections.

You need minerals to help build and/or maintain healthy cells, muscles, connective tissue, organs, and bones. Important minerals include calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, sodium, sulfur, and chloride. We also need smaller amounts of copper, fluoride, chromium, molybdenum, manganese, selenium and zinc.

The best source for vitamins and minerals is a balanced diet “that closely approximates the Mediterranean diet,” says Dr. Charles T. Molta, who is the medical director at Kethley House at Benjamin Rose Place and Chief of Rheumatology at Marymount Hospital in Garfield Heights.

The Mediterranean diet generated a lot of media buzz last year. It is based on high consumption of grains, such as rice, and “healthy” oils, such as olive oil; high-to moderate consumption of vegetables, fruits, beans and nuts; moderate-to-low consumption of fish, poultry, and dairy products; low consumption of eggs, red meat and sweets; and moderate-to-low consumption of alcohol, usually as red wine.

In addition to containing vitamins and minerals, food contains compounds called phyto-chemicals. These are plant chemicals that growing numbers of scientific studies show play a role in protecting us from things like diabetes, osteoporosis, cancer and heart disease. Food also provides fiber, which is necessary for good stomach, intestine, and bowel health.

But for older people—especially women past menopause and men and women who live alone—food often doesn’t answer all the body’s vitamin and mineral needs. That’s because, as we age, there is a decrease in the body’s ability of produce vitamin D (which is necessary for the absorption of calcium) and to absorb some minerals and vitamins (especially the B vitamins).

Smoking and consuming alcohol make things even worse. Smoking interferes with the absorption of vitamin C and several B vitamins and alcohol interferes with digestion and absorption of several B vitamins, vitamins A and D, and several minerals, including zinc and phosphorus.

Also, as we age, there are often problems—the need to live on a fixed income, the loss of the spouse who prepared the meals, a decreased sense of smell and taste, tooth loss or denture problems, etc.—that make shopping for, preparing, and/or chewing and swallowing food difficult.

The above—plus the growing number of small, but positive, studies that indicate that multivitamins can improve the immune system’s ability to fight off disease—mean that for many older people there are compelling reasons to be taking a multi-vitamin and/or a nutrition supplement.

Is a nutrition supplement right for you?

But not, stresses Dr. Molta, without first talking to your physician and doing research. “One of the best places to do that is reputable sites on the Internet,” says Dr. Molta. (See list at bottom of article).

People don’t think of supplements—which come as pills, tablets, capsules, powders, gels, extracts, and/or liquids—as drugs. Yet when they are taken as supplements they are being used as “non-prescription additions to a person’s diet,” he adds, “and they can have bad interactions with medications people are already taking.” This is especially true if high doses—megadoses—are taken. “More is not better,” says Dr. Molta. At the very least, megadosing creates very expensive urine; in worst-case scenarios, it can cause a condition—hypervitaminosis—that can be physically debilitating and require hospitalization.

If, after doing your research and talking with your physician, you decide a supplement is for you, shop smart. “You don’t need a senior-formula supplement to get the benefits a supplement can offer and you don’t need to buy a name brand ... House brands aren’t just cheaper, because discount stores—such as Wal-Mart or Marc’s—are selling so much product, their stuff is fresher, too,” says Dr. Molta.

For more information on supplements, visit the following Internet sites:

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition

www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/ds-savvy.html and www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/hclaims.html

Food and Nutrition Information Center

www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/old.htm

Mayo Clinic

www.mayoclinic.com (On Healthy Living tab click on Senior Health and Food & Nutrition)

National Library of Medicine

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/dietarysupplements.html and

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/vitaminsandminerals.html

Office of Dietary Supplements

<http://dietary-supplements.info.nih.gov>

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