

Food Supplements

What are supplements?

Supplements provide extra energy or nutrients to correct a deficiency in the diet.

People who market and sell supplements encourage customers to use supplements as a form of nutritional insurance, just in case their diet is inadequate.

It is always better if we are able to take what we need from food. If your diet is short on one nutrient it is likely to be short on others as well. A good diet provides you with all the nutrients you need; a poor diet plus supplements is not likely to address the problem.

There are some times where supplements are needed and these are discussed below.

When is it appropriate to supplement?

In these days of the “quick fix”, many people would prefer to take supplements than to worry about whether their diet is adequate. However, self-prescribing can be dangerous, particularly with large doses of fat soluble vitamins (A,D,E,K) and minerals. Just because something is good for you, it does not always mean that more must be even better.

If you think you may need a supplement ask yourself the following questions...

1. Do I follow the healthy eating guidelines?

If you follow the healthy eating guidelines your diet should be adequate: -

- Eat a variety of food each day from each of the four food groups...
 - Fruit - at least 2 serves and vegetables at least 3 serves daily
 - Breads and cereals - at least 6 serves daily
 - Milk and milk products - at least 2 - 3 serves daily
 - Lean meats, chicken, fish, eggs, dried peas, beans or lentils - at least 1 serve daily
- Prepare meals with minimum added fat and salt
- Choose prepared foods and snacks with minimum added fat (particularly saturated fat) and salt
- Maintain a healthy body weight through physical activity and healthy eating
- Drink plenty of fluids each day
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation

2. Do I have an increased need for a particular nutrient?

Often the rationale behind taking supplements is to provide assurance that you are getting all the nutrients you require.

This information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor or individual consultation with a Registered Dietitian. This information may only be used in its entirety.

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While in most cases, it is much better getting the nutrients you need in the form of food, there are situations where an increased need for a particular nutrient makes this difficult. Supplementation in such cases may be advisable.

Examples of this may include...

- People following a vegan lifestyle and avoiding all food of animal origin may be deficient in vitamin B 12.
- People suffering injury or burns may have increased protein requirements.
- Women planning for pregnancy will need folic acid supplementation to protect against neural tube defects in their baby. Women are advised to take one tablet (0.8mg folic acid) daily for four weeks before they might become pregnant through to 12 weeks after actually becoming pregnant. Check out the Ministry of Health pamphlet, Folic Acid and Spina Bifida, Code 4147. Available from your local Public Health Unit.
- People who have no sunlight exposure, particularly the housebound elderly and women who choose to cover up for religious reasons may need vitamin D supplementation.
- Women after menopause have increased calcium needs. Calcium supplementation may be needed, but calcium from foods is better absorbed and utilised by the body – look to increase your intake of these foods.
- People who have iron deficiency anaemia have increased iron needs

3. Do I have a condition that limits my nutrient intake?

Some people have an allergy / food intolerance or diseases that may limit the intake of particular nutrients. Such people may benefit from supplementation - in fact, that may be the only way for them to ensure adequate nutrient intake.

Examples of this may include:

- A person with a milk allergy / intolerance - they may require calcium supplementation.
- Someone who simply does not like eating or has a very restricted food intake e.g. a jockey or gymnast - they may need supplementation of many nutrients
- Someone taking drugs for a specific medical condition - the drug food interactions associated with it may indicate the need for certain supplementation

Again, consult your family doctor or a Registered Dietitian for advice on which supplement to use and the correct dosages.

Commonly used supplements

A variety of supplements are available. Some supplements provide a single nutrient e.g. vitamin C, while others such as multivitamin tablets contain a variety of nutrients. Nutrient levels can vary from very low, which won't correct a deficiency, to megadoses that can be potentially harmful.

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Some supplements provide a range of nutrients. These include products like Complian, Sustagen and Thrive. They are high-energy drinks that provide carbohydrate, protein and fat, as well as essential vitamins and minerals.

Dangers associated with supplementation

Because we know vitamins and minerals are good for us, it is easy to assume that “more must be better”. Once the body has met its requirement for nutrients the excess nutrients have to be dealt with in some way. With the water-soluble vitamins (C & B), any excess is simply excreted in the urine. While this is not a problem in most cases, with large overdoses, it can lead to liver and kidney problems. Excess amounts of the fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, & K) and some minerals are stored in the liver or fatty tissues.

Taking supplements of one nutrient can affect your need for others. Copper deficiency, for example, can occur through zinc supplementation. Zinc deficiency can occur if excessive intake of iron is taken.

Our Advice

- It is always better to get all the vitamins and minerals you need in food form. Try increasing the variety of foods you eat – fruit, vegetables, breads, cereals, low-fat milk products and lean meat, fish, chicken or beans rather than adding supplements. For more advice read the Ministry of Health pamphlet, “Eating for Healthy Adult New Zealanders” Code 1518. This is available from Community and Public Health.
- Choose your product carefully. Select tablets that are in the right dosage for your needs and follow the instructions carefully.
- Store all supplements away from children - they can be just as dangerous as other drugs
- Always consult with your family doctor, a Registered Dietitian or recognised health professional. Do not rely on the advice of someone who makes money selling you vitamins.

Remember there is no magic formula - if the claims sound too good to be true they probably are!

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