

Ask the professionals

Vitamin supplements

by Angela Mombourquette

A walk down the supplement aisle in any pharmacy or health food store can sometimes be a bit overwhelming. There are literally hundreds of products suggesting that you may not be getting enough of, well—almost everything—in your diet.

But when it comes to vitamins, do you really need supplements to stay healthy? That depends on a number of factors, including your age, gender, and, especially, your eating habits.

There are 13 vitamins essential to human health. Anne Leiper, Pdt, is a clinical dietitian at the Nutrition Education Clinic at the QEII Health Sciences Centre in Halifax, and she says the average person can get all the vitamins and minerals they need by simply eating according to Canada's Food Guide.

She emphasises that vitamin supplements shouldn't be a first choice. "Probably the most popular vitamin people ask me about is vitamin C, because it helps boost immunity and helps the body fight off infection," says Leiper, adding that it's easy for most people to get enough vitamin C by eating things like oranges and bold-coloured fruits and vegetables.

Still, some health consumers may be feeling the pressure to pop a vitamin pill, given that there seems to be so much research into the benefits of vitamins right now. You can hardly click on a news site or flip through the paper without seeing speculation about whether vitamin E may protect from Alzheimer's, or whether vitamin D could play a role in preventing autoimmune disorders.

For the most part, though, research outcomes are still moving targets, offering

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few solid consumer guidelines. However, just this past July, Osteoporosis Canada spoke out in support of new vitamin D research, issuing its own recommendation that daily supplements of 400 to 1000 IU of vitamin D should be taken by adults under age 50, to help prevent osteoporosis. That's in contrast to the current Health Canada guideline, which stands at 200 IU. For adults over 50, Osteoporosis Canada suggest supplements of between 800 and 2000 IU, over Health Canada's recommendation of 400 to 600 IU.

Leiper acknowledges that vitamin D is one of the most common supplements Canadians might need, in addition to calcium, and possibly iron. "There are a lot of women who are anemic, which is often linked with their menstrual cycles. Sometimes they are vegetarian and are not getting the appropriate protein. There's nothing wrong with being vegetarian, but you've got to be a smart vegetarian, and you need the type of protein that's going to be best absorbed

for the iron." Leiper recommends getting bloodwork done if you suspect you might have a deficiency. And, she says, if you're a woman of childbearing age, or pregnant, or hoping to get pregnant, "that would be a time to look into taking a prenatal vitamin that has a good concentration of some of the things you need a little extra of, like folate or iron or calcium."

If you're planning to take any kind of supplement you should speak with a physician or pharmacist first, because interactions with some medications can occur. And Leiper counsels caution to anyone looking for a quick nutritional fix. "You can get too much of a good thing—an overload of certain minerals or vitamins—and there are repercussions for that. And people who take a lot of supplements every day can end up having expensive urine, because your body excretes what it can't absorb. The word I tend to use a lot is moderation." ●



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