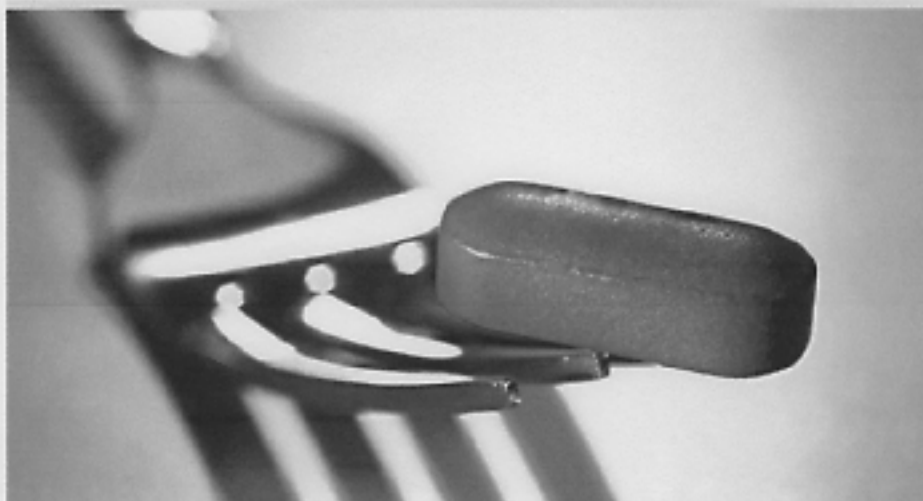


Do You Need a Multivitamin?



Given the shortcomings of the average American's dietary and exercise practices, it's natural to wonder whether you should take a multivitamin every day. The answer is: It's probably not necessary, but it won't hurt.

Most healthcare professionals and dietitians give this simple advice: Eat a balanced diet every day. Make sure it contains vegetables, complex carbohydrates and lean proteins. Engage in physical activity on most days of the week. If you practice all these things, your body should function well, and a vitamin supplement isn't necessary.

SOME EXCEPTIONS

For some people, though, the addition of a multivitamin supplement may help ensure more complete nutrient intake. Use of a supplement providing a specific vitamin is necessary for people who have a particular deficiency. A multivitamin might also be beneficial for people who are following a rigid diet to achieve weight loss or to manage a health condition such as celiac disease.

VITAMIN D DEFICIENCY

Vitamin D deficiency has been receiving a lot of attention lately. That's because Americans are producing less and less of this vitamin naturally, and it's leading to disease risk.

Every tissue in the body — the brain, heart, muscles, immune system and more — contains receptors for vitamin D. This means that adequate levels of vitamin D are needed for these tissues to function well.

The only way to identify vitamin D deficiency is through blood work. Your healthcare provider will analyze the lab's findings and recommend a dosage of vitamin D, if needed. In some cases, a prescription-strength level of vitamin D supplementation is required. This therapy should be managed by a healthcare professional.

As a preventive measure, it's a good idea to strive to increase vitamin D production yourself. Strategies include getting sun exposure (still using sunscreen to protect against skin cancer) and eating dietary sources of vitamin D: oily fish (salmon, mackerel, bluefish, tuna) and foods specifically fortified with the vitamin (certain cereals, orange juices, soy products, dairy products).

MICRONUTRIENT TESTING

People who experience symptoms such as extreme fatigue, as well as people who have been diagnosed with conditions such as anemia or phosphorous overload, may want a more detailed picture of their nutrient status. This can be obtained with micronutrient testing.

This type of testing measures the amount of specific nutrients in your body, using a blood sample.

Typical micronutrient tests analyze vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and amino acids. The results provide you and your healthcare professional with comprehensive nutritional analysis that can guide decisions about food and beverage intake, vitamin intake, and the potential addition of specific supplements, such as vitamins, antioxidants or fish oil.

The price for micronutrient testing is around \$360, depending on the area of the country and the laboratory chosen for analysis. It may not be covered by some health insurance plans.

SELECTING A SUPPLEMENT

If you do take a multivitamin or supplement, always select one that is manufactured and sold by a recognizable company.

The Food and Drug Administration requires vitamin and supplement manufacturers to analyze the identity, purity and strength of ingredients in their products, but it does not require them to demonstrate safety and effectiveness. Visit www.consumerlab.com to read details and analysis about specific supplement products by name. (A subscription is required.)

The most important piece of advice about vitamins and supplements is this: Always tell your healthcare provider about any vitamins or supplements you are taking. They may interact with prescribed medications or with the state of your health. ■

Information for this handout was obtained from the following sources: Robyn Kievit, NP, RD, a family nurse practitioner and registered dietitian based in Boston; research articles published in the U.S. National Library of Medicine; and SpectraCell Laboratories.

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