

VITAMINS: SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

We all know that vitamins and minerals are essential to good health. This raises the question: if taking 100% of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of vitamin C is good enough to be keeping us going through the day, then why shouldn't taking 1000% be even better? We are constantly being reminded that we can get our vitamins from a pill. Why should we bother choking down bushels of brussels sprouts when we can take a pill? The broad consensus from nutrition experts is that while vitamins are indeed essential, big doses are usually pointless and can even be harmful. And no pill is likely to ever adequately substitute for a health diet of those brussel sprouts and those other vegetables your mother told you to eat.

WHY THEY MATTER

Vitamins and minerals are substances your body needs for normal growth and functioning. Some facilitate crucial chemical reactions, while others act as building blocks for the body. Nutritionists call vitamins and minerals "micronutrients" to distinguish them from the macronutrients such as proteins, carbohydrates and fats that make up the bulk of our food. While micronutrients are vital for the proper processing of macronutrients, they're needed in small quantities: Think of it this way: If macronutrients are the gas in your engine, then micronutrients are like the motor oil, coolant and battery fluid. Micronutrient deficiency can lead to acute diseases with exotic names like scurvy, pellagra and beriberi. Deficiency diseases were common in the US until the 40's when the FDA-mandated fortification of common foods like bread and milk.

MAINTAINING A HEALTHY DIET

It's easy to get enough nutrients from your food if you maintain a healthy diet. However, most people fail that test because we are so busy these days and have no time to sit down and smell the tomatoes. We need to eat 5 servings of fruits and veggies. That's why we resort to taking the multivitamins as sort of a nutritional safety net for many of us. But it's just a safety net and we must remember that; so called whole food like vegetables and whole grains contain fiber and a host of other important nutrients that can't be adequately delivered through pills. In fact, scientists are still finding new trace elements in whole foods that may someday be labeled essential to health but aren't found in a pill.

CHOOSING A SUPPLEMENT

It's easy to become overwhelmed when looking at the dietary supplement shelves of your local supermarket. While many of the health claims are unproved or downright bogus, some supplements may be useful for some groups. Major multivitamin makers typically produce different varieties for men, women, children and older folks. Picking a pill that fits your group makes sense, as the optimal level of various nutrients varies by age and sex. For example, premenopausal women need more iron than children or the elderly. However, elderly have a harder time obtaining adequate amounts of vitamin B-12 from natural sources so the need for supplementation may increase with age.

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