



Q&A

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Questions and Answers about Multivitamins and Other Dietary Supplements

Q. Who uses vitamins and supplements?

A. According to the most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data more than half (52 percent) of American adults use some sort of dietary supplement. The number is higher for women than for men and varies by age group, with a 63 percent use rate among adults ages 60 and up. Other surveys have shown higher usage for supplements, with a CRN survey finding 62 percent of American adults take supplements.

Q. What are the most commonly used vitamins and supplements?

A. According to the NHANES data, the most commonly used supplement is the multivitamin. With or without minerals, the multivitamin is taken regularly by 35 percent of the adult population in this country. The next most popular supplements are vitamin E (13 percent), vitamin C (12 percent), and calcium (10 percent).

Q. Are consumers taking handfuls of supplements?

A. Actually, no. According to the NHANES data, the vast majority of consumers take one to three products regularly. Overall, 47 percent of the population said they use only one supplement, while 36 percent said they use two to three and 17 percent said they use four or more.

Q. Who needs supplements?

A. Many nutrition experts urge multivitamin use by all adults, and some additionally recommend supplementation with specific nutrients for particular needs—folic acid—for women of childbearing age and vitamin B-12 for people over 50, for example.

The *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* emphasizes maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active and choosing food sensibly. The guidelines put a heavy emphasis on obtaining nutrients from conventional foods, but also recognize that “fortified foods and dietary supplements may be useful sources of one or more nutrients that otherwise might be consumed in less than recommended amounts.”

The *2005 Dietary Guidelines* recommend:

- Supplements containing folic acid for women who could become pregnant;
- Vitamin D supplements for older adults and others with little exposure to sunlight;
- Vitamin B-12 supplements for people over 50.

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While the American Dietetic Association (ADA) also advocates meeting nutritional needs through diet, the group recognizes that nutritional supplements and food fortification may be desirable for some nutrients and for some individuals.

Q. Why do we need supplements?

A. Nutrition surveys consistently show that a substantial proportion of the American people fail to consume the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) of various nutrients.

According to the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the vitamins and minerals that are especially low in American diets include vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin E, calcium and magnesium.

Multivitamins are a safe, reliable and affordable means of ensuring adequate intake of a variety of nutrients. Other supplements should be added according to individual needs.

Q. What are the benefits of multivitamin usage?

A. Multivitamins are a convenient, smart and proven way to bridge between what we should eat and what we actually eat. For some population groups, supplemental intakes are specifically recommended as a preferred means of obtaining certain nutrients. A multivitamin can help fill these needs.

Multivitamin users tend to adopt other healthy habits (such as healthy eating habits, regular exercise and a good relationship with their doctor) and to have a reduced risk of some chronic diseases. Some of the benefits are as follows:

- Multivitamins help fill nutrition gaps and ensure adequate intake of a variety of nutrients, as well as help in promoting overall good health.
- The use of a daily multivitamin can help maintain proper immune function and is particularly important in older Americans and may protect against infectious disease and cognitive decline.
- Antioxidant vitamins and minerals can support eyesight, help maintain cognitive function, combat oxidative damage from environmental exposures and potentially reduce the risk of some chronic diseases, including some cancers and heart disease.
- Folic acid plays a critical role in protecting against neural tube birth defects such as spina bifida when taken by women of childbearing age before and during pregnancy. A multivitamin with folic acid ensures getting the proper amount.

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- A calcium supplement with vitamin D can help to achieve peak bone mass, slow the rate of bone loss that occurs with aging and protect against the development of osteoporosis.

Q. Is there evidence to suggest that vitamin supplements might be doing more harm than good?

A. The evidence overwhelmingly supports healthful benefits of vitamins. In general, for the healthy population, taking vitamin supplements in reasonable amounts is safe. Consumers should be aware of all the nutrients they are getting—from conventional and fortified foods as well as from vitamin supplements so as not to go beyond what are considered Tolerable Upper Levels (ULs) by government advisory boards like the Food and Nutrition Board. However, the vast majority of Americans are not coming anywhere near those levels and in fact as demonstrated by nutrition surveys are falling short of the Recommended Dietary Allowance for many nutrients.

For individuals with serious illnesses such as cancer or heart disease, it is important that they seek guidance from their healthcare professional with regard to anything they put into their body.

Q. Why are there so many differing articles and conflicting news reports about multivitamins and supplements?

A. The fact is, multivitamins have been widely used and highly valued by American consumers ever since vitamins first became commercially available in this country, beginning in the early years of the 20th century. Supplement use has been associated with decreased risk of chronic diseases in many observational studies involving tens of thousands of people. Surveys show that people take vitamins and other supplements to maintain or improve their health status.

Often the media reports on the most recent study, rather than on the vast body of scientific research. As science is an evolutionary process, it is important to keep in mind that scientific studies should be put into the context of overall research, rather than viewing each individual study as the last word.

Q. What advice should consumers have about the multivitamin?

The multivitamin is not a substitute for other healthy lifestyle choices like eating right, exercising regularly and visiting your doctor. A multivitamin, used daily and consistently over the long-term, and combined with other smart lifestyle choices, will provide important benefits for your health. The best advice is to eat your fruits and vegetables, take your vitamins, and try to adopt other healthy lifestyle habits.