

Are Dietary Supplements Worth Buying?

Q: Are there any health benefits from dietary supplements?

A: Unfortunately, the answer is often “No.” Advertisements for “dietary supplements” frequently claim they will keep you from getting sick, or help you to live longer. But according to the National Institute On Aging, “Often there is little, if any, scientific support for these claims...Some supplements can hurt you. Others are just a waste of money because they don’t give you any health benefits.”

There are many “dietary supplements” on the market today that are sold over the counter, including vitamins, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs, and hormones. Some products, like drinks or energy bars, have supplements added to them. The Food & Drug Administration (FDA) does not review these supplements before they reach the market—only if they believe a product is considered unsafe.

The best way to get vitamins or minerals is through the food you eat—not added supplements. If you feel you can’t eat enough, ask your doctor if you need a multi-vitamin and mineral supplement. It doesn’t have to be labeled for “seniors,” and it doesn’t have to be a large, or “mega dose” vitamin. The theory that “if a little is good, a lot must be better,” does not hold for supplements. Taking more than 100% of the daily value of a vitamin or mineral could be harmful, and your body may not be able to use the entire supplement, so you’re wasting your money. People over the age of 50 may need supplements for certain purposes, such as vitamin B12, Calcium and vitamin D, extra Iron for women, and vitamin B6.

Antioxidants are natural substances found in food. There is no proof that large doses of antioxidants will prevent chronic diseases like diabetes, cataracts or heart disease. Rather than taking a supplement, eating fruits and vegetable, at least 5 servings per day, or using vegetable oil and eating nuts can give you the antioxidants you need.

There are also herbal supplements, like ginseng, Echinacea, or ginko biloba, which come from certain plants. When you use any herbal supplements, you are using them as a drug, and they can interfere with other medications you may

already be taking. Some herbal supplements can cause high blood pressure, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, headaches, seizures, heart attacks, or stroke. Some supplements can increase the risk of bleeding or, if a person takes them before or after surgery, they can affect the person’s response to anesthesia. Dietary supplements can also interact with certain prescription drugs in ways that might cause problems. Vitamin K, for example, can reduce the ability of certain blood thinners to prevent blood from clotting. Antioxidant supplements, like vitamins C and E, can reduce the effectiveness of some types of cancer chemotherapy.

Before you start taking a dietary supplement, talk to your doctor or a registered dietician. Don’t go on the recommendation of a friend or an internet site. Consider the source of any information you read: is it from a group that stands to make money from the sale of this product? If something worked for your neighbor, it does not mean that it will work for you. Don’t buy supplements that have combinations of ingredients that you do know, want, or need.

All products labeled as a dietary supplement carry a Supplement Facts panel that lists the contents, amount of active ingredients per serving, and other added ingredients (like fillers, binders, and flavorings). The manufacturer suggests the serving size, but you or your health care provider might decide that a different amount is more appropriate for you.

There is actually a federal Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS), part of the National Institutes of Health, which publishes fact sheets that give consumers an overview of individual vitamins, minerals and other dietary supplements. ODS says if you don’t eat a nutritious variety of foods, some supplements might help you get adequate amounts of essential nutrients. However, supplements can’t take the place of the variety of foods that are important to a healthy diet. Contact ODS at (301)435-2920, or: https://ods.od.nih.gov/HealthInformation/DS_WhatYouNeedToKnow.aspx