

## To Supplement or Not to Supplement

Jane consumes a donut and diet cola for breakfast. Her lunch comes from the vending machines at work. Dinner is courtesy of the drive-through window at her favorite restaurant. She worries that her eating habits are not providing her with enough of the nutrients that she needs to stay healthy, so she takes a multivitamin/mineral supplement. Jane's friend Sam usually eats oatmeal, a scrambled egg, and juice for breakfast. His lunch comes from the local deli and consists of a sandwich made with whole wheat bread, lean meats, and lots of vegetables. He snacks on fruit when hungry and prepares his evenings meal at home after a 2-hour workout at the gym. Sam takes his multivitamin/mineral supplement so he can have extra energy.

Sam and Jane represent typical individuals who use dietary supplements. Nationwide, almost one-half of Americans use supplements, at an annual cost of nearly \$4 billion dollars. Some of the most popular supplements are multivitamin/mineral supplements. People use vitamin and mineral supplements for many reasons - to make up for poor eating habits, to help prevent disease, and to increase their energy to improve performance.

Should everyone be taking multivitamin/mineral supplements? Nutrition experts suggest that following the Food Guide Pyramid is one way to ensure that we are getting all of the nutrients that we need. However, individual food preferences and hectic lifestyles can make following the Food Guide Pyramid a challenge. In these instances, a multivitamin/mineral supplement might be beneficial. Individuals might also benefit from a multivitamin/mineral supplement if:

- they are on a low-calorie weight loss diet (usually less than 1200 calories)
- they are elderly and not eating much
- they are a strict vegetarian (no animal products including meat, milk, cheese, and eggs)
- they can't or won't consume milk or other calcium-rich dairy products
- they are women of child-bearing age

For individuals who decide to use multivitamin/mineral supplements, follow this advice:

- ◆ “Choose a multivitamin/mineral supplement that provides no more than 100% of the Daily Value for the references vitamins and minerals. Some vitamins and minerals can be harmful when taken in high doses.
- ◆ Make sure that you select a supplement that is marked with an expiration date far enough in the future to enable the use of all of the product. Some vitamins lose potency with time, so do not use the multivitamin/mineral supplement after its expiration date.
- ◆ The price of a multivitamin/mineral supplement is not always a sign of quality. Select a multivitamin/mineral supplement that meets USP (U.S. Pharmacopeia) standards to help ensure that the supplement selected is of high quality. Look for the initials USP on the label. Many times, store-brand multivitamin/mineral supplements are just as good, and more economical, than national brands.

For most people who consume a healthful diet, taking a multivitamin/mineral supplement probably won't cause harm, but may not help either. The body can't store most of the excess nutrients, so it eliminates them. The result? “Expensive urine”.

Finally, people should not use a multivitamin/mineral supplement as a substitute for a poor

diet. Every day we are discovering more about the disease fighting properties of chemicals found in foods, especially fruits and vegetables. If we rely on a multivitamin/mineral supplement to keep us healthy we may be missing out on these chemicals as well as fiber. Food tastes better than supplements, so we should try to improve our diets by following the Food Guide Pyramid. A supplement is no substitute for a healthful diet.

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