

# VITAMINS & MINERALS: DO I NEED A SUPPLEMENT?

Vitamin & mineral supplements are hot topics in the media, in fitness centers, and around college campuses. Everywhere you go, you hear different advice about what and how much to take for everything from boosting your energy to preventing cancer. It may be difficult to separate fact from fiction.

Regardless of whether or not you decide to take supplements, your best bet for optimal health is to *eat a variety of healthy foods* and *be physically active everyday*. Vitamin and mineral supplements CANNOT make up for a lousy, fast-food diet and couch potato lifestyle. And, they DO NOT supply the disease-fighting phytonutrients that only whole foods, especially vegetables and fruits, provide.

Still, a daily multivitamin and multimineral supplement may not be a bad idea, especially if you are restricting your food intake, are a vegetarian, have several food allergies, and/or choose a less-than-optimal diet on a regular basis. Use these helpful tips for deciding *what* and *how much* to take.

## **Making the Most of a Multi:**

- Choose one that supplies all the nutrients in amounts *smaller than, equal to, or very close to* the reference Daily Value (DV). Keep in mind that for vitamins and minerals, more is NOT better. Not only do special high-dose formulas cost more, but they also may be harmful. High doses of some vitamins (especially vitamins A and D) and most minerals can have serious toxic effects.
- Look for a multi with the USP (United States Pharmacopeia) or consumerlab.com seal of approval. Unlike food products and drugs, the government does not rigorously regulate vitamin and mineral supplements. The USP or consumerlab.com seal guarantees that the product has voluntarily undergone tests of quality and has met certain standards for disintegration, strength or potency, and purity.
- Be sure to check the expiration date, and store the supplement away from humidity and light, which can destroy some nutrients' potency.
- Take the supplement with a meal. Food slows down the movement of the nutrients through your digestive tract, allowing more time for them to dissolve and to be absorbed into your body.

## **Calcium:**

Most multi's don't supply enough of this bone-building mineral. College students need 1000 to 1300 mg of calcium daily. This can be supplied by 3-4 servings per day of low fat milk products or other calcium-rich foods. One serving, which provides about 300 mg of calcium, is defined as 1 cup of milk, 1 cup of calcium fortified soy milk or orange juice, 1 cup of yogurt, 1 ½ ounces of cheese, or some other fortified product that contains about 30% of the DV for calcium. If you fall short in servings, you should make up the difference with a calcium supplement. Look for a supplement with calcium citrate for best absorption and least digestive distress. Also, take no more than 500 mg at one time and take it separate from your multi (since iron and calcium compete for absorption).

## **Antioxidants (Vitamins C and E):**

Many experts now recommend higher amounts of vitamins C and E than most multi's provide. These antioxidant vitamins may help prevent several chronic diseases, including heart disease and cancer. For optimal health, 200-500 mg of vitamin C and 100-400 IU of vitamin E are now recommended by some. You can get this higher amount of vitamin C by eating plenty of vegetables and fruits every day. However, it's almost impossible to get the higher amount of vitamin E from foods alone, since it is found mostly in vegetable oils and other very high fat foods, which shouldn't be taken in excess.

## **Bottom Line:**

A variety of healthy foods, along with daily physical activity, are the best strategies to achieve optimal health. Vitamin and mineral supplements should *supplement*, not *replace*, a healthy lifestyle.