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Dietary Supplements for Older Adults

Bill is retired and lives alone. Often, he's just not hungry or is too tired to fix a whole meal. Does he need a multivitamin, or should he take one of those dietary supplements he sees in ads everywhere? Bill wonders if they work — will one help keep his joints healthy or another give him more energy? And, are they safe?

Dietary supplements can be beneficial at any age, but they can also have unwanted side effects, such as unsafe prescription drug interactions. They could also not work at all.

It's important to understand the supplements you are taking and why you are taking them. Talk with your doctor if you are considering taking a supplement.

What Is a Dietary Supplement?

Dietary supplements are substances you might use to add nutrients to your diet or to lower your risk of health problems, such as osteoporosis or arthritis. Dietary supplements come in the form of pills, capsules, powders, gel capsules and tablets, extracts, or liquids. They might contain vitamins, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs or other plants, or enzymes. Sometimes, the ingredients in dietary supplements are added to foods and drinks. A doctor's prescription is not needed to buy dietary supplements.

Should I Take a Dietary Supplement?

Eating a variety of healthy foods is the best way to get the nutrients you need. However,

some people may not get enough vitamins and minerals from their daily diet. When that's the case, their doctors may recommend a dietary supplement to provide missing nutrients.

If you are thinking about using dietary supplements:

■ **Learn.** Find out as much as you can about any dietary supplement you might take. Talk with your doctor, pharmacist, or a registered dietitian. A supplement that seemed to help your neighbor might not work for you. If you are reading fact sheets or checking websites, be aware of the source of the information. Could the writer or group profit from the sale of a particular supplement? Read more about choosing reliable health information websites at www.nia.nih.gov/health/online-health-information-it-reliable.

■ **Remember.** Just because something is said to be “natural” doesn't mean it is safe or good for you. It could have side effects. It might make a medicine your doctor prescribed for you either weaker or stronger. It could also be harmful to you if you have certain medical conditions.

■ **Tell your doctor.** Before deciding to start taking a dietary supplement to treat any health condition, check with your doctor. Do not take a supplement to try to diagnose or treat any health condition without first checking with your doctor. Learn how medications can interact with dietary supplements. For more information, visit the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health at www.nccih.nih.gov.

■ **Buy wisely.** Choose brands that your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist recommend. Don't buy dietary supplements with ingredients you don't need. Don't assume that more is better — it can actually be harmful to take too many supplements or those with a very high concentration of a nutrient. It is possible to waste money on unneeded supplements.

■ **Check the science.** Make sure any claim about a dietary supplement is based on scientific proof. Look for the United States Pharmacopeia (USP) verified mark. USP verifies the identity,

quality, strength, and purity of supplements. Learn more at www.usp.org/verification-services/verified-mark. Information on some dietary supplements is available on MedlinePlus at https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/herb_All.html, but it's important to note that most supplements listed have limited evidence of any benefit. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

■ **Be a savvy consumer.** Some advertisements for dietary supplements in magazines, online, or on TV promise that these products will make you feel better, keep you from getting sick, or even help you live longer. It's important to know that often, there is little, if any, science supporting these claims.

Vitamin and Mineral Recommendations for People Over 50

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 recommends how much of each vitamin and mineral men and women of different ages need.

For example:

■ **Vitamin B12:** 2.4 mcg (micrograms) each day. If you are taking medicine for acid reflux, you might need a different form, which your health care provider can give you information about.

■ **Calcium:** Women over age 50 need 1,200 mg (milligrams) each day. Men need 1,000 mg between age 51 and 70 and 1,200 mg after 70, but not more than 2,000 mg a day.

■ **Vitamin D:** 600 IU (International Units) for people age 51 to 70 and 800 IU for those over 70, but not more than 4,000 IU each day.

Dietary Supplements for Older Adults

People over age 50 may need more of some vitamins and minerals than younger adults do. Your doctor or a dietitian can tell you whether you need to change your diet or take a vitamin or mineral supplement to get enough of these:

Calcium: Calcium works with vitamin D to keep bones strong at all ages. Bone loss can lead to fractures. Calcium is found in milk and milk products (fat-free or low-fat is best), canned fish with soft bones, dark-green leafy vegetables like kale, and foods with calcium added, such as breakfast cereals.

Vitamin D: Most people in the United States consume less than recommended amounts of vitamin D. Talk with your doctor about adding vitamin D-fortified milk and milk products, vitamin D-fortified cereals, and fatty fish to your diet, or using a vitamin D supplement.

Vitamin B6: This vitamin is needed to form red blood cells. It is found in potatoes, bananas, chicken breasts, and fortified cereals.

Vitamin B12: This helps keep your red blood cells and nerves healthy. While older adults need just as much vitamin B12 as other adults, some have trouble absorbing the vitamin naturally found in food. If you have this problem, your doctor may recommend that you eat foods like fortified cereals with this vitamin added, or take a B12 supplement. Strict vegetarians and vegans are at greater risk of developing vitamin B12 deficiency because natural food sources of vitamin B12 are limited to animal foods. Talk with your doctor about whether taking a B12 supplement is right for you.

■ **Vitamin B6:** 1.7 mg for men and 1.5 mg for women each day.

Sometimes, too much of a vitamin or mineral can be harmful. Most, if not all, of your daily vitamins and minerals should come from food. When thinking about whether you need more of a vitamin or mineral, think about how much of each nutrient you get from food and drinks, as well as from any supplements you take. Check with a doctor or dietitian to learn whether you need to supplement your diet.

For a comprehensive list of vitamin and mineral intake levels for older adults, visit www.dietaryguidelines.gov to read or download the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*.

What Are Antioxidants?

You might hear about antioxidants in the news. These are natural substances in food that might help protect you from some diseases. Here are some common antioxidants that you should be sure to include in your diet:

■ **Beta-carotene:** Found in fruits and vegetables that are either dark green or dark orange

■ **Selenium:** Found in seafood, liver, meat, and grains

■ **Vitamin C:** Found in citrus fruits, peppers, tomatoes, and berries

■ **Vitamin E:** Found in wheat germ, nuts, and sesame seeds; and canola, olive, and peanut oils

Currently, research results suggest that large doses of supplements with antioxidants will not prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes. In fact, some studies have shown that taking large doses of some antioxidants could be harmful. Again, it is best to check with your doctor before taking a dietary supplement.

Herbal Supplements and Older Adults

Herbal supplements are dietary supplements that come from plants. These types of

supplements are taken by mouth, whether it's by a capsule, tablet, powder, or liquid.

A few that you may have heard of are ginkgo biloba, ginseng, echinacea, and black cohosh. Researchers are looking at using herbal supplements to prevent or treat some health problems, but it's too early to know if these are both safe and useful. Previous studies of certain herbal supplements have not shown any benefits.

It's important to know that just because a supplement is natural, or comes from plants, that doesn't necessarily mean it's safe.

Are Dietary Supplements Safe?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) checks prescription medicines, such as antibiotics or blood pressure drugs, to make sure they are safe and do what they promise. The same is true for over-the-counter drugs such as pain and cold medicines. However, the FDA does not have authority over dietary supplements, which do not have to be approved by this agency for safety or efficacy before being sold to the public.

The federal government does not regularly test what is in dietary supplements, and companies are not required to share information about the safety of these products with the FDA before they sell them. So, just

How Can I Track My Medications and Dietary Supplements?

You may be taking a handful of different medicines, dietary supplements, or over-the-counter drugs. Use the form at www.nia.nih.gov/health/tracking-your-medications-worksheet to help keep track of your medications. Bring a completed and updated copy of this form to every appointment with your doctor.

because a dietary supplement is on a store shelf, that does not mean it is safe, does what the label says it will, or contains what the label states.

If the FDA receives reports of possible problems with a supplement, it will issue warnings about the product. The FDA may also take supplements that are found to be unsafe off the market.

The Federal Trade Commission investigates reports of ads that might misrepresent what dietary supplements do. A few private groups, such as the U.S. Pharmacopeia, NSF International, ConsumerLab.com, and the Natural Products Association, have their own “seals of approval” for dietary supplements. To earn such a seal, products must be made by following good manufacturing procedures, must contain what is listed on the label, and must not have harmful levels of ingredients that don’t belong there, such as lead.

Whether you take dietary supplements or not, it’s still important to follow a healthy lifestyle. Try sticking to a healthy diet, being physically active, keeping your mind active, not smoking, and seeing your doctor regularly.

For More Information About Dietary Supplements

Office of Dietary Supplements

National Institutes of Health

301-435-2920

ods@nih.gov

<https://ods.od.nih.gov>

Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Information Center

301-504-5755

fnic@ars.usda.gov

www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

Dietary Guidelines for Americans

dietaryguidelines@usda.gov

www.dietaryguidelines.gov

Federal Trade Commission

877-382-4357 (toll-free)

866-653-4261 (TTY/toll-free)

www.consumer.ftc.gov/health

Food and Drug Administration Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition

888-723-3366 (toll-free)

odsp@fda.hhs.gov

www.fda.gov/food/dietarysupplements/default.htm

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

888-644-6226 (toll-free)

866-464-3615 (TTY/toll-free)

info@nccih.nih.gov

www.nccih.nih.gov

United States Pharmacopeia (USP)

301-881-0666

800-227-8772 (toll-free)

www.usp.org

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

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