

ASK THE DOCTOR

Answers to Your Health Questions

Daily Multiples & Health

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Selecting a Daily Multiple Vitamin

There are many vitamin and mineral supplements from which to choose. Finding the right multivitamin may take a little time and require some effort. You need to ask questions, read labels, and compare products. You also need to choose wisely and use multivitamins to complement good nutrition, not replace it. Once you find the right formula for your gender and age, you will have a stronger nutritional foundation.

Q. What exactly are vitamins?

A. A vitamin is an organic substance or chemical found in food that is absolutely necessary for life. We now know that even though vitamins each have their own specific jobs, they also work together as a team. A deficiency in even one vitamin can make us very sick.¹ Vitamins are either fat or water-soluble. Vitamins A, D, E, and K are fat-soluble and can be stored for awhile in our fat and in the liver. The water soluble vitamins, vitamin C and the B vitamins, can't be stored, and must be taken more than once a day for optimum nutrition.²

Q. What does RDA mean?

A. The RDA, or Recommended Dietary Allowance, is defined as "the average daily dietary intake level that is sufficient to meet the nutrient requirement of nearly all healthy individuals in a group." This means that RDA amounts of vitamins and minerals are the standard amounts that healthy people need to consume each day to prevent dietary deficiencies. A good example is vitamin C. The RDA for this hard working vitamin is the level of vitamin C you need to prevent scurvy, not the amount you need for superior health.³

The RDA does not account for people who are teenagers, elderly, past the age of 45, taking oral contraceptives, pregnant, nursing, dieting, engaging in intense

physical activity, drinking alcohol, taking prescription medications, eating processed food, eating prepared food, stressed at work or at home, smoking, or exposed to second-hand smoke or air pollution.⁴⁻¹²

Q. My diet high is very high in whole grains and I eat at least 9 servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Do I still need to take a multivitamin?

A. This question gets easier to answer as more and more diet and multivitamin studies are completed. Recent studies have shown that, even in individuals who were eating a very healthy diet, taking a multivitamin improved their nutritional status.^{13,14}

Q. There are so many different multivitamin formulas on the shelves. What vitamins should be in the supplement I buy?

A. It depends on many things. Men and women have different nutritional needs and therefore, need different multivitamin formulas. Your age also determines the amount and type of vitamins and minerals you should take. In the case of multivitamins, "one size" most definitely does not fit all!

However, men and women of all ages require some similar vitamins. Let's start with those.

Vitamin A: Helps prevent certain types of cancer; helps reduce harmful cholesterol levels and the risk of heart attacks. Prevents night blindness; helps improve our vision; aids our immune system; helps keep our skin, teeth, bones, hair, and gums healthy and strong; helps reduce age spots.^{15,16}

Vitamin C: Strengthens the immune system; helps prevent chronic illness, cataracts, assists in lowering cholesterol, helps make collagen; repairs damaged cells, bones and teeth. Helps heal wounds, burns, and bleeding gums. Helps healing after surgery, prevents colds and flu, protects us against cancer, and helps our bodies absorb iron.¹⁷

Vitamin D: Without vitamin D, the minerals phosphorus and calcium cannot build strong bones and teeth. With vitamins C and A, vitamin D helps prevent colds; helps absorb calcium and vitamin A.¹⁸

Vitamin E: Vitamin E helps keep our skin young looking, helps oxygen get around our bodies; prevents and helps dissolve blood clots; helps burns heal faster; helps lower blood pressure; helps nerves convey messages faster; stops leg cramps and helps boost our energy levels.¹⁹

Vitamin K: Vitamin K is essential to the activation of osteocalcin, a protein that helps prevent bone loss.²⁰ Additionally, without vitamin K, our bodies couldn't make prothrombin, a blood-clotting chemical, and our blood simply would not clot.²¹

The B Vitamins: The B vitamins are an important complex of vitamins. Like a group of good friends, the B vitamins do their best when they are all together.

Thiamin: Also called vitamin B1, thiamin helps keep our nerves and muscles, including the heart, working well. It can help prevent seasickness; tooth pain that happens after dental work; helps treat herpes zoster (shingles); and helps the digestion of carbohydrates. Thiamin prevents beriberi.²²

Riboflavin: Also known as vitamin B2 and vitamin G, riboflavin is easily harmed by light. Deficiency in riboflavin is the most common vitamin deficiency in America. Riboflavin helps our vision; supports reproduction; helps eliminate sore mouths, lips, and tongues; and helps metabolize fats, proteins, and carbohydrates.²³

Niacin: Niacin helps lower total cholesterol, raises HDL (the good) cholesterol, improves circulation, helps make our skin healthy looking, helps to eliminate bad breath, helps to reduce migraine headaches and dizziness, and reduces our cravings for sweets.²⁴

Vitamin B6: Also referred to as pyridoxine HCl, this B vitamin can only work in our bodies for eight hours. Then we must get more. Deficiencies of vitamin B6 are noted in many diseases. Vitamin B6 helps us make antibodies, helps stop nausea, reduces morning sickness, relieves mouth dryness caused by certain medications, helps reduce leg cramps, numbness in the hands, helps us use protein and fats, and helps make niacin. With folic acid, B6 can reduce harmful levels of homocysteine, an amino acid implicated in heart disease and Alzheimer's disease.²⁵

Vitamin B12: Possibly the most complex of all the vitamins, B12 is sometimes called "nature's most beautiful cofactor" because of its striking deep red color. With folic acid, B12 helps make DNA, the molecule that carries our genetic code. Vitamin B12 helps our nerve cells spark and communicate, helps burn fat, and keeps us energized. Deficiencies of B12 can result in a serious type of anemia and potentially harmful nerve damage.²⁶

Folic Acid: Also called folate, this B vitamin has made huge headlines recently for its powerful ability to prevent spina bifida, a serious birth defect.²⁷ A recent study determined that folic acid reduces the risk of breast cancer in women who drink alcohol.²⁸ Folic acid can also help milk production in nursing mothers; reduce pain; make our skin look healthier; kill the germs that cause food poisoning; help cells

grow and divide; and help make DNA.²⁷

Biotin: Our intestines can make biotin, but only if we have an adequate amount of beneficial flora. Biotin is a natural beauty product. It helps delay gray hair and baldness. Biotin also helps heal eczema and inflammation of the skin. It can also help aching muscles.²⁹

Pantothenic Acid: This B vitamin helps us make antibodies to fight infection. Pantothenic acid converts sugar and fat into energy and reduces fatigue. Our adrenal glands depend on pantothenic acid to function well.³⁰

Q. What minerals do we need to stay healthy?

A. There are many minerals we need each day to keep us healthy. Minerals provide rigidity and strength to our teeth and bones that form our skeleton, help with nerve and muscle function, are vitally important in biochemical interactions and the normal clotting of blood, and for everyday tissue repair and growth.³¹

Make sure the multivitamin supplement you buy contains calcium, iodine, magnesium, zinc, selenium, copper, manganese, chromium, molybdenum, sodium, potassium, boron, and vanadium.³² Iron should only be in formulas designed for women who are still menstruating. Other adults can easily meet their iron needs from food, and excess can be unhealthy.³³

Q. Do women need certain minerals more than men?

A. Yes, women need silica to help keep their bones healthy.³⁴ Compared to men, women of any age also need more boron and calcium.³⁵ However, women going through or past menopause need even more calcium to protect their bones.³⁶

Q. What can destroy or interfere with vitamins and minerals?

A. Researchers believe that while food may, in fact, contain all the good things we need, many factors can destroy or interfere with many vitamins and minerals. Vitamins are easily wiped out by light, air, heat, and water. Cooking many foods actually destroys their

vitamins. Eating other foods raw is less nutritious than cooking them.³⁷ Drinking alcohol will deprive you of several vitamins.³⁸ Oral contraceptives interfere with B12 and folic acid in women who take them.³⁹ When you eat a meal at a restaurant, don't count on getting any vitamins from your food as the use of heating lamps destroys many nutrients.³⁷ Many prescription medications can rob you of several vitamins and minerals.⁴⁰ Smoking cigarettes and exposure to secondhand smoke destroys vitamin C.⁴¹

Fortunately, taking a quality multivitamin will provide you with dietary insurance against all these losses.^{13,14} And, the good news gets even better. Studies have also shown that the longer you use supplemental multivitamins, the more substantial the benefits are to your health.^{42,43}

Q. Is it possible for me to get all the vitamins, minerals, and herbs I need in one pill taken once a day?

A. No, you can't. For vitamins, minerals, and herbs to be effective they need to be in amounts that could not possibly fit into a single tablet or capsule in a size small enough to be swallowed. Many vitamins are only active in the body for a short period of time and need to be replenished every 6 to 8 hours. You need a formula designed to be taken at intervals during the day (3 times a day, just like meals). This will provide you with superior benefits.

Q. What else should be in multivitamin formulas?

A. Both men and women can benefit from a combination of lutein/ zeaxanthin, grape seed, bilberry, black tea, and cherry fruit.

Lutein and zeaxanthin are found in high concentrations in the macula—the back of the eye where the retina is located. Both are excellent antioxidants.⁴⁴ Anyone who spends time outdoors in the sun may be exposed to harmful ultraviolet radiation, which is very damaging to our eyesight. Lutein and zeaxanthin help protect us from this radiation, help filter out other harmful light, help prevent age-related macular

degeneration (the most common form of blindness for older people), and help prevent glaucoma and cataracts.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷

Grape seed is a potent antioxidant that helps strengthen our capillaries, veins, and arteries; helps our heart stay healthy; helps decrease bruising, reduce varicose veins, and leg swelling. Grape seed also helps our immune systems and helps reduce allergic responses.^{48,49}

Bilberry is another antioxidant that helps prevent hardening of the arteries, cataracts, and macular degeneration.⁵⁰ Studies show that people who drink black tea have less cancer and lower chances of stroke.^{51,52} And, cherry fruit is another powerful antioxidant that can help reduce the risk of death from heart attack. Flavonoids found in cherries are also natural anti-inflammatory compounds. Flavonoids also strengthen collagen, tendons, and cartilage. Extracts of cherries are used frequently in Europe for treatment of varicose veins.⁵³

Q. Are there other ingredients that should be in multivitamin formulas for men?

A. If you are purchasing a multivitamin for a man, make sure lycopene is in the formula. Lycopene is the pigment that makes tomatoes red. The redder the tomato, the more lycopene is present. Numerous studies suggest that lycopene levels in the blood may be associated with reduced incidence of prostate cancer as well as heart disease and age-related macular degeneration.^{54,55}

Q. What should be in multivitamin formulas for women?

A. All women can benefit from cranberry, nature's antibiotic. Women have used this excellent antioxidant for many years to help reduce urinary tract infections.^{56,57} Women of all ages are concerned about supporting bone health. Phosphorus is an important bone building nutrient.^{58,59} Women who are still menstruating should look for chaste tree berry extract in their multivitamin formulas. This herb can reduce the

symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS).⁶⁰ Women going through menopause or past it need soy extract. Soy protects women against heart attacks and keeps bones from becoming brittle and breaking.^{61,62}

HEALTH FACT:

Studies have also shown that the longer you use supplemental multivitamins, the more substantial the benefits are to your health.

Q. What else should I look for in a multivitamin supplement?

A. Make sure the manufacturer is reputable. Ask the people working in the store for brands they recommend or personally take. Read the labels of any multivitamin supplement you are considering purchasing. They should be protected from light, since light can destroy these fragile substances. That means they should be in an opaque (non-transparent) package, and the tablets should be coated with a light resistant shield (usually white or ivory). Besides vitamins, minerals, and herbs it should contain, some things shouldn't be in your multivitamin. The best multivitamins contain no sugar, artificial coloring, or artificial flavoring.

Conclusion

While it's difficult to keep up with the latest nutrition developments, finding a multiple that can help you achieve optimum health may be easier than you think. The right blend for you depends on your gender, age, and additional health concerns. Knowing the vitamins, minerals, and herbs that you need will help you when choosing a multivitamin.

Life is too short to spend it saddled with chronic illness and or poor energy. High quality multivitamins will protect you with powerful dietary insurance for superior health.



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