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Vitamin and mineral supplements

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Summary

- Vitamins are organic compounds used by the body in small amounts for various metabolic processes.
- Vitamin supplements cannot replace a healthy diet.
- Those who may need vitamin supplements include women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, people who consume alcohol in amounts over those recommended as safe, drug users, and the elderly.

Vitamins are organic compounds that our bodies use, in very small amounts, for a variety of metabolic processes. It is best to get vitamins and minerals from eating a variety of healthy unprocessed foods.

While taking a general 'broad-spectrum' vitamin and mineral supplement 'just in case' poses little health risk, and may benefit a person whose diet is restricted and lacks variety, taking vitamin and mineral supplements instead of eating a nutritious diet is not recommended.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies

Your body only needs a small amount of vitamins and minerals every day. A varied diet generally provides enough of each vitamin and mineral. However, some people may need supplements to correct deficiencies of particular vitamins or minerals.

People who may benefit from vitamin and mineral supplements include:

- pregnant women
- women who are breastfeeding
- people who drink alcohol above the amount that is recommended for reducing risk of disease (one standard drink **a day** for non-pregnant women and two for men)
- cigarette smokers
- illegal drug users
- crash dieters or people on chronic low-calorie diets
- the elderly (especially those who are disabled or chronically ill)
- some vegetarians or vegans
- women with excessive bleeding during menstruation
- people with allergies to particular foods
- people with malabsorption problems such as diarrhoea, coeliac disease or pancreatitis.

Women planning a pregnancy should consider taking folic acid (folate) supplements to reduce the risk of neural tube defects in the baby. Folic acid can also be found in some fortified foods such as some breads. Foods fortified with folic acid have the nutrient added to them during production to boost their nutritional value.

Vitamins and minerals from food

Research indicates that most of the vitamins you get from the food you eat are better than those contained in pills. Even though vitamins in supplements are synthesised to the exact chemical composition of naturally-occurring vitamins, they still don't seem to work as well.

The main exception to this is folate. The synthetic form (in a supplement or fortified food) is actually better absorbed by the body than folate from food sources.

Food is a complex source of vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals (plant chemicals), which all work together. Supplements tend to work in isolation. Research has shown that a food component that has a particular effect on the body may not have the same effect when it is isolated and taken as a supplement. This could be because the vitamins and minerals in foods are also influenced by other components of the food, not just the 'active ingredient'.

Phytochemicals are an important component of food and are thought to reduce the incidence of heart disease and some cancers. Supplements do not provide the benefits of phytochemicals and other components found in food. Taking vitamin and mineral supplements is no substitute for a healthy diet.

Using vitamin and mineral pills like medicine

It is commonly believed that taking mega-doses of certain vitamins will act like medicine to cure or prevent certain ailments. For instance, vitamin C is suggested as a cure for the common cold, and vitamin E is widely promoted as a beneficial antioxidant to help prevent heart disease.

After extensive research, however, neither of these claims has been shown to be true. Large-scale studies have consistently shown little benefit in taking mega-doses of supplements. In fact, there is some evidence that taking high-dose supplements to prevent or cure major chronic diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, may be harmful to your health.

Vitamin and mineral supplements can be toxic in high doses

Taking higher than recommended doses of some vitamins may cause problems. For example, the vitamins A, D, E and K are fat soluble, which means they are stored in the body. High doses of these vitamins can be toxic.

High doses of some water soluble vitamins, like vitamin B6, can also become toxic. Large folate intakes can hide vitamin B12 deficiencies. In extreme cases, for example, where people take 100 times the recommended dietary intake (RDI), this can stop the work of anticonvulsant drugs, such as those used in epilepsy.

Excessive doses of some minerals may also cause problems. At just five times the RDI, zinc, iron, chromium and selenium can be raised to toxic levels in the body. For example:

- Large intakes of fluoride (especially in childhood) may stain, and even weaken, the teeth.
- Very large doses of fish oil can lead to decreased blood clotting.
- Iron toxicity is also common. Even a small amount over the RDI can cause gastrointestinal upset, nausea and black bowel actions (poo). Severe toxicity can lead to coma and even death.
- High levels of vitamin B6 have been linked to some types of nerve damage.
- Doses of vitamin C above one gram can cause diarrhoea.
- High doses of vitamin A may cause birth defects, as well as central nervous system, liver, bone and skin disorders.

For a healthy adult, if supplements are used, they should generally be taken at levels close to the RDI. High-dose supplements should not be taken unless recommended under medical advice.

Stress, tiredness and vitamin pills

Vitamin supplements are commonly considered to be an antidote to stress. Feeling under pressure doesn't automatically lead to a vitamin deficiency, so taking a vitamin supplement won't necessarily make the stressful feelings go away.

Popping a pill will not likely cure persistent tiredness either. If you are feeling run down, it is more likely to be due to stress, depression, insufficient sleep or other factors, rather than a deficiency of a particular vitamin.

Vitamins and minerals as a short-term measure

Taking vitamin and mineral supplements should be viewed as a short-term measure. The long-term use of some high-dose supplements can lead to symptoms of toxicity. If you feel that you could be lacking in certain vitamins and minerals, it may be better to look at changing your diet and lifestyle rather than reaching for supplements.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Nutrition Australia.

Things to remember

- Vitamins are organic compounds used by the body in small amounts for various metabolic processes.
- Vitamin supplements cannot replace a healthy diet.
- Those who may need vitamin supplements include women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, people who consume alcohol in amounts over those recommended as safe, drug users, and the elderly.

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[Reduce your intake of coffee, alcohol and soft drinks... 10 tips on how to eat more calcium...](#)

- [Body image and diets](#)

[Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...](#)

- [Dairy and dairy alternatives](#)

[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)

- [Food allergy and intolerance](#)

[Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction...](#)

- [Food for sport - tucker talk tips](#)

[Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

- [Gluten-free diet](#)

[Gluten sensitivity can be managed with a gluten-free diet...](#)

- [Heart disease and food](#)

[A diet low in saturated fats and high in fibre and plant foods can substantially reduce your risk of developing heart disease...](#)

- [How to cut down on salt \(slideshow\)](#)

[Even if you are careful about the salt you consume, you may be surprised that some of the food you eat contains hidden salt that you're not even aware of. Learn how to cut down on salt...](#)

- [Mood and food](#)

[Your mood can affect your food choices, and your food choices may affect your mood...](#)

- [Simple ways to cut down on fat \(slideshow\)](#)

[Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here's how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...](#)

- [Sporting performance and food](#)

[Good nutrition and a healthy diet are essential to improving your sports performance...](#)

- [Tips to keep our snacks on track \(slideshow\)](#)

[Most of us are prone to the odd snack or two. Check out these simple tips to keep your snacks on track...](#)

- [Vegetarian and vegan eating](#)

[A well-planned vegetarian or vegan diet can meet nutritional needs during all stages of life...](#)

- [Vegetarian diets and children](#)

[Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met...](#)

- [Weight loss and fad diets](#)

[With a balanced eating plan, it's what you leave in that makes all the difference...](#)

- [Weight management services](#)

[Always consult with your doctor before choosing any weight management service...](#)

- [Women's nutrition for life](#)

['Nutrition for life' identifies a woman's four main life stages and how to eat healthily for each of them. Following this information can lead to better health at any stage of your life...](#)

Nutritional needs throughout life

- [Women's nutrition for life](#)

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- [Bottle feeding - nutrition and safety](#)

[Breastmilk or commercial infant formula is necessary for all babies less than 12 months...](#)

- [Breastfeeding and your diet](#)

[Breastfeeding women need to eat regularly and include a wide variety of healthy foods in their diet...](#)

- [Childcare and healthy eating](#)

[Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children...](#)

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- [Disability - managing underweight](#)

[There are a number of ways that a person with a disability can successfully avoid unwanted weight loss...](#)

- [Eating tips for babies](#)

[First foods for babies can be prepared easily and cheaply at home without salt, seasonings and sweeteners...](#)

- [Eating tips for children \(3\) - older toddlers](#)

[Offer children the same foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition...](#)

- [Eating tips for preschoolers](#)

[Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite...](#)

- [Eating tips for school children](#)

[Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...](#)

- [Eating tips for young toddlers](#)

[Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full...](#)

- [Eggs](#)

[The humble egg is a powerhouse of nutritional goodness. Eggs are full of things your body needs. They are a great source of protein, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals \(such as vitamin A, vitamin D...](#)

- [Food and your life stages](#)

[The nutritional requirements of the human body change as we move through different life stages...](#)

- [Food for babies - tucker talk tips](#)

[Before six months, breastmilk or formula is the only food and drink that your baby needs...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you](#)

[may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

- [Good food for Elders - tucker talk tips](#)

[Good nutrition, a healthy diet and physical activity can help Elders prevent or manage health problems...](#)

- [Healthy active Koori kids - tucker talk tips](#)

[Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older...](#)

- [Healthy budget - tucker talk tips](#)

[You can buy more food if you spend most of your money on basic healthy foods like bread, cereals, fruit and vegies...](#)

- [Healthy eating during pregnancy - tucker talk tips](#)

[Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby...](#)

- [Healthy eating for adolescent girls](#)

[Eating healthy food is important at any age, but it's especially important for teenagers...](#)

- [Healthy eating for women in midlife](#)

[As you get older you need fewer calories, but your need for other nutrients remains unchanged. Healthy...](#)

- [Healthy eating for women in their later years](#)

[Being well nourished improves women's mental and physical health and quality of life at all life stages...](#)

- [Healthy eating for young women](#)

[Good nutrition is especially important during this stage of your life when there is so much happening: independent living, career development, travel, establishing relationships, babies and families...](#)

- [Lunch at work](#)

[Did you know lunch is just as important as breakfast? In other words, don't skip lunch: you need it every day! A nutritious lunch will give you the energy to get through an afternoon of work...](#)

- [Nutrition needs when you're over 65](#)

[Nutrition needs vary with age and gender. Now you're older, the foods and drinks that make up a healthy diet may need to be slightly different from when you were younger. In general, you&...](#)

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[A balanced approach to sunlight exposure will help you get enough vitamin D while protecting against skin cancer...](#)

- [Antioxidants](#)

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[The eight B-group vitamins are essential for various functions within the body...](#)

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Related information on other websites

- [Dietitians Association of Australia](#)
- [Nutrient Reference Values \(NRVs\) for Australia and New Zealand](#)
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