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## Vitamins - common misconceptions

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- [Healthy Eating](#)
- [Healthy Eating - Vitamins and supplements](#)

## Summary

- Vitamins are not drugs or miracle cures.
- Taking large doses of vitamins can be harmful because your body only needs vitamins in very tiny amounts.
- Eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, wholegrains and cereals will give your body the vitamins it needs, at the right level and in the right balance.
- Vitamin supplements can't replace a healthy diet, but a general multivitamin may help if your diet is inadequate.
- People who may need vitamin supplements include pregnant and breastfeeding women, people who consume alcohol in amounts over the recommended level, drug users and the elderly.

There are many misconceptions about vitamins and the health benefits they offer. Vitamins play an important role in keeping the body healthy. However, taking large doses of certain vitamins can actually be harmful. For most people, it is best to get the vitamins our bodies need from eating a variety of healthy, unprocessed foods rather than by taking supplements.

Vitamin supplements are frequently misused and taken without professional advice. They are often used as a form of medicine to treat ailments such as colds, or to counteract lifestyle issues such as stress. Contrary to popular belief, vitamins aren't drugs or miracle cures. They are organic compounds that participate in various metabolic functions. High-dose supplements should not be taken unless recommended under medical advice.

## The vitamin alone is not the answer

Proper balance and adequate levels of essential nutrients is important for a range of complex processes in our body. When vitamins are taken as supplements, they are introduced into the body at levels that could never be achieved by eating even the healthiest of diets.

Supplementation can also result in large doses of a single vitamin being eaten 'alone.' When vitamins are consumed, they have many companions to help them along the way. For instance, provitamin A (beta-carotene) in food is accompanied by hundreds of its carotenoid relatives.

Simply taking a vitamin pill is not an instant fix for feeling run down or lacking in energy. It is the combination of a whole range of compounds (most of which we probably don't even know about) in plant foods that gives us the protection. When you artificially remove one of them and provide it completely out of context, it may not be as effective and, in the case of some vitamins, can have negative effects.

## Recommended dietary intakes

Many people mistakenly believe that since small amounts of vitamins are good for you, then large amounts must be better. In the case of vitamins, it is better to follow the rule of 'less is more'.

The vitamins A, D, E and K are fat soluble, which means they can be stored in the body. Taking high doses of these vitamins, especially vitamin A, over a long period of time can result in harmful levels in the body unless you have a medically diagnosed deficiency.

Some of the water soluble vitamins can also cause side effects in high doses. For instance, vitamin B6 has been linked with nerve damage when taken in large doses.

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

## Deficiencies and illness

The fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K can be locked away in the liver and body fat, and stored for a long time. The water-soluble vitamins, including B-complex and vitamin C, are mostly only stored for a shorter period of time.

A vitamin deficiency takes weeks or months before it will affect your health. For instance, it would take months of no vitamin C before you developed scurvy. An occasional lapse in good eating will not harm you, if your usual diet consists of a wide variety of fresh foods.

## Sometimes supplements are needed

Supplements do have a role to play for some groups of people. For instance, people on long-term restrictive weight loss diets or people with malabsorption problems, such as diarrhoea, coeliac disease, cystic fibrosis or pancreatitis, can benefit from supplements.

Folic acid supplements are strongly recommended for women planning a pregnancy to reduce the risk having a baby with neural tube defects, like spina bifida. Also, people who follow vegan diets, especially if pregnant, may benefit from vitamin B12 supplements.

People who are advised by their doctor that they need to take vitamin supplements are encouraged to consult an accredited dietitian, who can work with their doctor to provide dietary advice related to the person's situation.

If you need to take a supplement, it is best to take multivitamins at the recommended dietary level, rather than single nutrient supplements or high-dose multivitamins.

## The common cold and vitamin C

Many people think that vitamin C helps prevent the common cold. Despite exhaustive research across the world, there is still no strong evidence to prove this. Some studies have shown that taking large doses of vitamin C (more than 1,000 mg per day) continuously or when you first develop cold symptoms, may ease some of the symptoms and the duration – on average, making it about half a day shorter. It does not prevent you catching a cold.

You also need to consider the health risks associated with taking large doses of vitamin C. Large doses may cause nausea, abdominal cramps, headaches, fatigue, kidney stones and diarrhoea. It may also interfere with your body's ability to process (metabolise) other nutrients, for example, it could lead to dangerously raised levels of iron.

Excessive amounts of vitamin C in the body can also interfere with medical tests, such as diabetes tests, giving a false result.

Adults need about 45 mg of vitamin C per day and any excess amount is excreted.

## Stress, depression and anxiety

Some vitamin and omega-3 fatty acid deficiencies can lead to emotional disturbances. However, if you are feeling run down, it is more likely to be due to stress, depression or unhealthy lifestyle habits (such as insufficient sleep or smoking), rather than a vitamin deficiency.

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. More serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, aren't caused or prevented by vitamins, although a healthy diet and good nutrient intake can help support a person to better cope with their condition.

## Vitamin E and heart disease

Vitamin E is widely promoted as a beneficial antioxidant that can help prevent heart disease. Unfortunately, several large-scale reviews have conclusively found no evidence that vitamin E supplements prevent death from heart disease. In fact, there may be greater risk of all-cause death from taking such supplements.

## Cancer cures

Vitamin A in large doses does not cure cancer and can be toxic, particularly if taken as pills rather than food. There is some evidence that vitamin E could play a small role in preventing some cancers although, equally, there is evidence that it could speed up the onset of other types of cancer. However, this has not been proved or disproved.

While it is argued by some that megadoses of antioxidants can help with the effectiveness of conventional cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the evidence is far from supporting this. In fact, it has been shown that megadoses of antioxidants can actually interfere with some medical treatments for cancer by helping to protect the cancer cells that the therapies aim to destroy.

## Some research findings

A number of studies into supplement use have shown negative findings. For instance:

- Vitamin A (beta-carotene) was thought to reduce the risk of some cancers, but has been linked to an increase in others, such as lung cancer in smokers, if taken in supplement form.
- Several long-term studies have shown that prostate, breast and lung cancer risk are not decreased by taking high-dose supplements containing vitamins E or C or selenium.
- People taking high-dose vitamin E supplements have been found to have higher rates of early death (mortality).

## Anti-ageing vitamins

Vitamin E is often singled out as the potential fountain of youth. However, there is no evidence that taking large doses of any vitamin can either stall or reverse the effects of ageing. Neither can any one vitamin restore a flagging sex drive or cure infertility.

## Vitamins and chronic disease

In developed countries like Australia, vitamin deficiency is rare, but the inadequate intake of some vitamins is not so rare and has been linked to a number of chronic diseases. These include cardiovascular disease, cancer and osteoporosis.

There is ongoing research to study the effects of taking vitamin supplements to prevent chronic disease, and evidence around nutrition and diet is constantly changing. It is important that you consult with your doctor before taking vitamin supplements in high doses.

## Where to get help

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

## Things to remember

- Vitamins are not drugs or miracle cures.
- Taking large doses of vitamins can be harmful because your body only needs vitamins in very tiny amounts.
- Eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, wholegrains and cereals will give your body the vitamins it needs, at the right level and in the right balance.
- Vitamin supplements can't replace a healthy diet, but a general multivitamin may help if your diet is inadequate.
- People who may need vitamin supplements include pregnant and breastfeeding women, people who consume alcohol in amounts over the recommended level, drug users and the elderly.

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#### **Food safety and storage**

- [Avoid food poisoning - Cook Safe \(video\)](#)  
[Learn how to prepare and cook food safely at home...](#)
- [Avoid food poisoning - Shop Safe \(video\)](#)  
[Learn how to keep your hot and cold foods separate and shop safely for food...](#)
- [Avoid food poisoning - Store Safe \(video\)](#)  
[Learn how to store food safely in your fridge at home...](#)
- [Be savvy with food this summer \(slideshow\)](#)  
[How to keep food fresh and safe in warmer weather...](#)
- [Cockroaches](#)

[Cockroaches prefer to live in kitchens and other food preparation areas, so they can feed off food spills...](#)

- [Don't let food poisoning ruin your summer \(slideshow\)](#)

[How to avoid food poisoning this summer...](#)

- [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...](#)

- [Emergencies - coping without gas or electricity](#)

[In a gas or electricity blackout you may have to think laterally to come up with ways to continue bathing, eating and keeping warm...](#)

- [Fishing - eat your catch with care](#)

[People who fish in the Lower Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers need to be careful about eating their catch because of the risk of chemical exposure...](#)

- [Food poisoning - listeria](#)

[Listeria infection is uncommon but very dangerous for the elderly, people whose immune systems are not working properly and pregnant women and their unborn babies...](#)

- [Food poisoning - prevention](#)

[You can minimise the risk of food poisoning by taking simple precautions...](#)

- [Food safety and storage](#)

[High-risk food should be kept at 5 °C or below, and above 60 °C to avoid the temperature danger zone and food poisoning...](#)

- [Food safety - eggs](#)

[To enjoy eggs safely - buy clean, keep cool and cook well...](#)

- [Food safety for summer celebrations \(video\)](#)

[In the hot weather there is a higher risk of food poisoning but if you follow some simple rules when you prepare, handle and store food it will significantly reduce your risk of getting sick...](#)

- [Food safety outdoors](#)

[Food poisoning is a real risk when taking food outside the home, especially in warmer weather...](#)

- [Food safety when cooking](#)

[Most foods should be cooked to at least 75 °C to minimise the risk of food poisoning...](#)

- [Food safety when eating out](#)

[If you have any doubt about the safety of food when you're out, don't eat it...](#)

- [Food safety when shopping](#)

[When you shop, choose, pack and transport food carefully...](#)

- [Food Standards Australia New Zealand \(FSANZ\)](#)

[FSANZ's role is to protect the health and safety of people in Australia and New Zealand by maintaining a safe food supply...](#)

- [Food – use-by and best-before dates](#)

[Check the 'use-by' or 'best before' date when you buy food...](#)

## **Dieting and diets**

- [10 tips on how to eat more calcium](#)

[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](#)

['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...](#)

- [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...](#)

- [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...](#)

- [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&...](#)

## Related Information

- [Nutrition Week](#)

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- [Vitamin and mineral supplements](#)

Taking vitamin supplements is no substitute for a healthy diet...

- [Vitamin D](#)

A balanced approach to sunlight exposure will help you get enough vitamin D while protecting against skin cancer...

- [Antioxidants](#)

Antioxidants scavenge free radicals from the body's cells, and prevent or reduce the damage caused by oxidation...

- [Vitamin B](#)

The eight B-group vitamins are essential for various functions within the body...

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## Related information on other websites

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

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