Dietary supplements: Are they a good idea? [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

Do you recommend any natural remedies (Melatonin, etc.) as dietary supplements for healthy living?

(2) Dear Alice,

I have been seeing a lot of ads on dietary supplements and have been thinking about trying them. However, I'm not sure if it's a good idea. Could you please tell me if the use of dietary supplements is really worth it?

Signed,
Supplementally Confused

Answer

Dear Reader #1 and Supplementally Confused,

To answer both of your questions, it may depend on the person and the type of dietary supplement. Supplements range from daily multi-vitamins and minerals to herbs, amino acids, and enzymes. There is evidence to suggest that certain supplements may be beneficial to meet specific needs and address some conditions. For example, calcium supplements are often encouraged to help prevent osteoporosis [2], and iron is recommended for those who are anemic [3]. Folks who are pregnant have increased nutritional needs and may benefit from supplementation with specific vitamins and minerals. However, there are plenty of supplements on the market that are just not needed by the average person. Moreover, the general recommendation for most healthy folks is to get any necessary nutrients from a healthy diet. If you’re not getting what you need from a balanced and varied diet, it’s wise to be aware of the potential risks associated with some supplements and to get the advice of a medical professional before making any purchases.

Vitamin and mineral supplements serve a purpose for some people; for others, being wary of what you might be getting with dietary supplements is warranted. First, consider what’s in the bottle. For example, though the supplement container labels may indicate the contents and suggested serving size, what an individual person needs in terms of a given nutrient will vary. Along those lines, both of you might be wondering if more is better? when it comes to the healthy stuff? and with supplements, that’s not necessarily the case. Taking too much of certain ones can pose some serious health risks (take a look at Extra vitamin E? Is it safe? [4]
and Health effects of ingesting too much vitamin C [5] for some instances where this is the case. It's also worth investigating whether certain supplements are safe based on your current health status. Some people may be at a higher risk for adverse health effects when taking dietary supplements with prescription medications or prior to some surgical procedures. What's more: while the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does set out quality standards to ensure that the contents and amounts of what the manufacturers indicate are in a given supplement, they do not ensure that any dietary supplement is safe or effective.

If you do feel you might benefit from a specific dietary supplement (or if your medical provider has made a recommendation), the time is nigh for some deeper investigative research. Both the FDA [6] and the National Institutes of Health's Office of Dietary Supplements [7] has more general information and answers to frequently asked questions to assist you in this info-quest. It's also a good idea to read up on the supplements that have piqued your interest (the Supplements and Ergogenic Aids [8] category in the Go Ask Alice! archives has a number of Q&As on specific supplements and Reader #1, you'll find a few questions having to do with melatonin in there as well). To know whether a particular one is right for you, you might also consider bringing the following questions up for discussion with your health care provider at your next appointment:

- What are the potential health benefits of this dietary supplement product?
- What are its potential benefits for me?
- Does this product have any safety risks?
- What is the proper dose to take?
- How, when, and for how long should I take it?

List from Office of Dietary Supplements, National Institutes of Health [10].

In lieu of any identified need or recommendation for a dietary supplement, how do you go about getting the nutrients you need from your diet? Eating a variety of foods, with a good balance between the food groups is a start. Making sure to also eat enough calories and choosing nutrient-dense options, such as whole grains and fruits as opposed to white bread and fruit juices, has proven to be fruitful in this direction as well. And, though there's plenty to know about dietary intake, you don't have to be a nutritional know-it-all to figure out what you need. One great resource to get up to speed in this area is ChooseMyPlate.gov [11], which contains tools for tracking your dietary intake, quizzes to boost your nutritional knowledge, and lots of helpful information from which to build a healthful diet. You might also peruse the Q&As in the Optimal Nutrition [12] category of the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity [13] archives for more even more information in your respective lines of inquiry. Lastly, meeting with a registered dietitian may also help you determine your specific nutrient needs and how best to meet them through your diet.

Hope this helped to satisfy your hunger for some supplemental reading!

Alice!
Category: Supplements & Ergogenic Aids [14]

Related questions

What to eat? [15]
Vitamin supplements good for health? [16]
How can I boost my immune system? [17]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [18]
Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [19]
Medical Services (CUMC) [20]
Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUMC) [21]

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