To supplement or not to supplement my diet [1]

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 Supplementally Confused,

It may depend on the type of dietary supplement. Supplements range from daily multi-vitamins and minerals to anabolic steroids. Certain supplements are recommended for various conditions. For example, calcium supplements are often encouraged to help prevent osteoporosis, and iron is recommended for those who are anemic. Pregnant women's increased nutritional needs may require that they supplement with vitamins and minerals. The performance enhancing supplements that are so widely advertised today (i.e., creatine, chromium picolinate, protein shakes, amino acids) are not needed by the average person.

The best way to get all of the nutrients your body needs is to eat a healthy diet. To do this, you should eat a variety of foods, have a good balance within the food groups (read Food Guidelines ? How much is a serving? [2] for details), eat enough calories (at least 1200), and make nutrient-dense choices, such as whole wheat bread and skim milk as opposed to white bread and whole milk.

Although vitamin and mineral supplements serve an important purpose for some people, you cannot depend on pills alone to provide your body with the nutrients it needs. Pills do not have phytochemicals, the non-nutrient compounds found in plant-derived foods that have biological activity in the body. Approximately 150 phytochemicals are found in foods along with the vitamins and minerals the body needs. Phytochemicals play a very important role in helping the body defend itself against cancer and cancer-causing agents, and probably many other things as well. An example of a known phytochemical is beta-carotene, a carotenoid. It is found in deeply pigmented fruits and vegetables, such as carrots, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, spinach, broccoli, cantaloupe, pumpkin, and apricots. Carotenoids act as antioxidants, reducing the risk of cancer. Read Antioxidants [3] for more info.
So the best bet is to do what you were told as a child and, "eat your fruits and veggies!" Five servings a day is a great start. If you do supplement, be careful not to overdose. More of a "good" thing is not necessarily good for you. Besides being expensive, over-supplementing can be harmful to you. For more information, read What's the difference between vitamins and minerals? from the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity archives.

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