Dear Alice:

Almost every place that I go to, I see stores and stores just devoted to selling vitamins and more vitamins, and I was wondering what the benefits are of a normal healthy person taking vitamins daily. Are there any risks for a normal healthy person who doesn't take vitamins? Will the person taking vitamins' health be improved or have longer longevity? Will the person not taking any vitamins be as healthy as the person who is taking them? And also, what will happen if a person takes more than he or she should consume every day?

Signed,
Health Enthusiast

Answer

Dear Health Enthusiast,

As you wrote, vitamins are ubiquitous these days. While the majority of American adults do take at least one supplement daily, vitamins are not necessarily recommended for everyone. Vitamin supplements are meant to be just that—a supplement to a healthy diet for those needing more vitamins. They are not meant to be a replacement for a healthy diet. For many healthy people, a balanced and varied diet provides enough vitamin-rich food for the body without risking anything by passing on the supplements. Some claims made by companies selling vitamins that may sound too good to be true, including promises of improved longevity. While certain groups do benefit from taking vitamin supplements (which usually involves a recommendation from their health care provider) others should be fine getting vitamins from the best source of all—nutritious foods.

How do you know if you are eating a balanced, varied diet that provides the vitamins you need? Your first stop might be to check out the Dietary Guidelines for Americans [2] and ChooseMyPlate.gov [3] for recommended nutrition guidelines. Foods are usually the best source of vitamins because they have all the components necessary to be digested and used by the body. Some synthetic vitamin supplements cannot be fully absorbed by the body, so you may not be getting as much of that vitamin as the capsule contains. If you’re getting enough vitamins from food, taking a supplement may not help at all? or in some cases, it could even be toxic because taking more than the safe daily levels of vitamins can be harmful. So how much is too much? The Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) is the amount of each type of vitamin that is recommended for consumption by healthy people per day, while the
Daily Value (DV) listed on a nutrition facts label describes what percentage of the daily amount that vitamin the food or supplement provides (for example, if one serving has a DV of 50 percent for a certain vitamin, consuming multiple servings would quickly surpass 100 percent).

Although the general population may not experience much benefit from taking vitamin supplements, there are some groups who are advised to take specific supplements to improve their health. These groups include:

- **People over the age of 50:** Individuals who are 50 or older are often advised to take extra vitamin B_{12} and vitamin D. These vitamins can be consumed through fortified foods or a supplement.
- **Pregnant women (and women who may become pregnant):** Folic acid, considered a B vitamin, is important for fetal development. Extra iron, which can be consumed through foods such as meat, spinach, and beans or through supplements, and vitamin C are also often recommended for pregnant women.
- **People with insufficient exposure to sunlight:** People who do not spend very much time in the sun and people with darker skin are sometimes recommended to increase their vitamin D intake either through fortified foods or supplements.
- **People advised to take supplements by her/his health care provider:** Certain illnesses or conditions may prompt a healthcare provider to prescribe vitamin supplements for their patients. Additionally young children and those who cannot eat enough to get all their vitamins may be prescribed vitamins.

You may consider talking to your health care provider before taking any vitamin supplements. Another issue you may want to be aware of is that consuming supplements may have side effects, such as an upset stomach or an unpleasant taste in your mouth. More pressingly, adverse effects could include vitamin toxicity from exceeding the safe daily level or interactions with medicine. As such, it’s crucial to tell your health care provider about any other medications you’re taking (prescription or over-the-counter) to identify potential interactions that could be dangerous.

To health!

Alice!

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