

## Frequently Asked Questions about Vitamins and Minerals

There are many different types and combinations of vitamins and minerals sold at pharmacies, grocery stores, health food stores and even department stores. The choices may seem endless and it can be confusing for even the most nutrition-savvy consumer.

### Can a multivitamin make up for unhealthy eating?

No. A multivitamin will give your body some vitamins and minerals, but your body needs much more to stay healthy. Eating a variety of foods according to **Canada's Food Guide** gives you the best mix of energy, protein, carbohydrates, heart healthy fats, vitamins and minerals. Vegetables, fruit, and whole grains also have fibre, antioxidants and phytochemicals ("fight-o-chemicals"), which protect against cancer, heart disease, stroke and bowel disease, and keep your immune system healthy. A daily multivitamin can be helpful in giving you some of the nutrients you need, but it can never replace healthy eating habits.



### Do I need to take a multivitamin?

A healthy eating pattern, as outlined in **Canada's Food Guide**, will help most people get the nutrition they need every day. If you do not eat the recommended number of food guide servings from all four food groups (Vegetables and Fruit, Grain Products, Milk and Alternatives and Meat and Alternatives), talk to your doctor or a dietitian to see if you need to take a multivitamin. Some people, like pregnant women or people over the age of 50, need extra vitamins and minerals to prevent certain conditions.

### Pregnant women and women of childbearing age

If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, or could become pregnant, you need to take a multivitamin with 0.4mg of folic acid every day. Research shows that taking a multivitamin containing folic acid before pregnancy, lowers the risk of having a baby with birth defects. (See Nutrition Matters: "Women, folic acid, and babies – what's the link?" and "Eating for two, not like two!")

## Men and women over the age of 50

All adults over the age of 50 need to take 10 micrograms (400 IU) of Vitamin D every day in addition to drinking two cups of milk or fortified soy beverage. Lack of Vitamin D increases the risk of weak and broken bones in older adults. Getting enough Vitamin D helps the body to absorb calcium needed for strong bones. Our bodies make Vitamin D when sunlight shines on our skin.

However, for a large part of the year in Canada, the sun's rays are not strong enough for us to make enough Vitamin D. While most people can get enough Vitamin D by following **Canada's Food Guide**, men and women 50 years and older need extra Vitamin D.



## What should people look for in a multivitamin?

For most people, a basic multivitamin is a good choice. It contains a balanced amount of many different vitamins and minerals and is unlikely to have any side effects. Check the expiry date and look for a DIN (Drug Identification Number) before buying. If a product has a DIN number, its formula has been reviewed and can be sold in Canada.

A single vitamin or mineral pill (for example, a pill with only Vitamin A) should be taken only on the advice of a health professional. More is not better. Taking too much of a single vitamin or mineral can be dangerous.

Many brands of vitamins have added herbs that advertisers claim will boost your energy or help you

lose weight. Beware of false promises. Ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking any herbs to make sure they are safe and necessary for you.

Many brands of vitamins may advertise that their product is “high potency” or offers “extra protection” from illness. Always remember that a vitamin is meant to supplement an already healthy diet, and that following a healthy diet will give you higher levels of nutrients. A supplement cannot replace healthy habits, like exercise and a healthy diet, and it cannot guarantee you health.

Some multivitamins claim to be from a natural source. Keep in mind that a natural source may not be better, and it may cost more. Your body cannot tell the difference. If you choose a natural source vitamin or mineral pill, make sure you see an NPN (Natural Product Number). This means that the product's formula, label and instructions have been approved by Health Canada.

## Supplement smarts...

- When it comes to taking multivitamins, more may not be better. Taking high doses of some vitamins and minerals can be harmful and make you sick. Make sure you follow the instructions on the bottle. If you have any questions check with your doctor or pharmacist.
- Keep your vitamin pills in a safe place away from children. Many of them look and taste like candy. The iron in vitamins – even in children's vitamins – can cause poisoning deaths in children.
- If you are not following an eating pattern like the one in **Canada's Food Guide**, see your doctor or dietitian to get some advice on which vitamins you may need to take.