

multiple answers about multivitamins

Should you take a multivitamin? What kind? Get answers to common questions about supplementation below from Sally Kuzemchak, RD, LD, a licensed and registered dietitian and writer in Columbus, Ohio, and Jenna A. Bell-Wilson, PhD, RD, LD, an assistant professor in medical dietetics at Ohio State University and nutrition contributing editor for IDEA.

1 My diet is pretty healthy. Do I still need to take a multivitamin every day?

In a perfect world, you'd get everything you need from a balanced diet full of whole foods, such as lean protein, whole grains and a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Such foods are each made up of a number of complex components, and many nutrition experts believe that it's the interactions among these various components that offer long-term health benefits, like disease prevention.

Unfortunately, in the real world, you may occasionally skip meals, rely on fast foods and eat a diet that is rarely perfect. So while a multivitamin supplement is *not* a substitute for whole foods and healthy eating, it can provide a safety net of important nutrients that may be missed.

2 Is it better to take vitamins and minerals through separate pills or in a multivitamin?

Nutrition experts seem to agree that taking a basic daily multivitamin is the better choice for most people. It is easier and cheaper to take one tablet every

day rather than popping separate pills. Plus, it makes sense to cover your bases with a wide variety of vitamins and minerals.

Still, some people may need separate pills in addition to a multi. For example, the recommended daily intake of calcium to help prevent osteoporosis ranges from 1,000 to 1,300 milligrams (mg) for women, depending on their age, according to the Institute of Medicine. Unfortunately, few women meet this recommendation through diet alone, and most multivitamins contain only about 10%–20% of that amount. That's why many nutrition experts recommend that women take one or two 500 mg calcium supplements daily, with added vitamin D to help absorption, *in addition to taking a multivitamin.*

3 Can taking a multivitamin give me more energy for workouts?

Not exactly. You can derive energy only from the calories found in food. Since vitamins and minerals contain no calories, they don't directly supply the body with energy. However, many fat- and water-soluble vitamins, such as the various B vitamins, do aid in energy-producing reactions in the body. So they help the body release and use the energy taken in through food.

"Vitamins and minerals are the spark plugs in the car; they're not the gas," says Nancy Clark, RD, author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook* (Human Kinetics 2003). Keep in mind, however, that if you're dragging through your workouts, eating a less-than-stellar diet is often the culprit, says Clark.

choosing a multivitamin

With so many multivitamins on store shelves today, how can you be sure you're selecting wisely? Here's what you should look for when comparing product labels:

Reasonable Doses. Levels of vitamins and minerals should be at or near 100% of the Daily Values established by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

A Balance of Vitamins and Minerals. Some preparations contain only a select few. For example, one new name-brand chewable product contains vitamins but no minerals.

Proof of External Certification. Certification programs are voluntary, but they do indicate that an independent organization has tested the product for quality. Two examples of seals to look for are USP (United States Pharmacopeia) and CL (ConsumerLab.com).

A Distant Expiration Date. Most multis have a shelf life of about 2 years, but they do tend to degrade over time. So the longer there is from the purchase date to the expiration date, the more potent the pill will be.

The Manufacturer's Contact Information. You'll need this if you have problems; contact information also tends to ensure that the company has quality control standards in place.

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