

Food or supplements: What's the verdict?

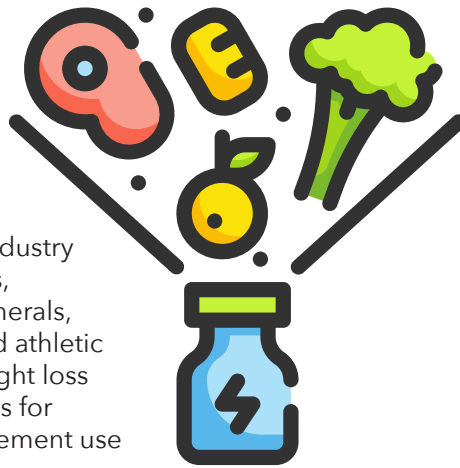
Dietary supplement use is commonplace in today's society, with well over half the US population reporting use of such products.¹ The industry has grown into a billion-dollar business, producing a variety of vitamins and minerals, herbals and botanicals, and energy and athletic performance enhancers, as well as weight loss aids. The top reason cited by Americans for supplement use is health,¹ but is supplement use really warranted?

While getting adequate nutrition and living a healthy lifestyle are important for overall wellness, research indicates a lack of evidence that nutrients in supplement form provide the same protection from chronic disease when compared to natural sources.² In large doses, certain vitamin and mineral supplements can result in toxicity and affect the absorption of other nutrients, whereas some dietary supplements can negatively interact with the metabolism of prescription medications.^{3,4} Advertisements and anecdotal reports for popular energy and weight loss aids can make these products appealing, but these products usually lack efficacy² and can even become dangerous.⁵ Consider what the product is claiming and remember that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends reaching optimal nutritional health by consuming a varied, nutrient-dense diet. Not only do our bodies absorb vitamins and minerals more efficiently and effectively through natural sources, but research also suggests there are additional compounds unique to the whole food complex that provide benefits: Compounds like carotenoids and polyphenols have been increasingly associated with positive health outcomes, suggesting it may be best to focus on a food-first approach for optimal wellness.

Remember to always talk to your healthcare provider before starting any kind of supplemental product.

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When to consider supplementing

While nutrition through food is best, and should be the primary tool for improving nutrient intake, there may be certain populations that would benefit from supplementation. Vitamin and mineral supplements may help correct a deficiency or fill in the gaps of a poor diet. If you fall into any of the categories below, ask your doctor if taking a supplement could be beneficial.

- ▶ Individuals who have a diagnosed nutrient deficiency
- ▶ Individuals following a restrictive or low-calorie diet
- ▶ Individuals with a medical condition that makes it difficult to absorb nutrients from food
- ▶ Individuals who lack adequate sun exposure (especially in the winter months)
- ▶ Women of childbearing age who may become pregnant
- ▶ Pregnant and lactating women who are unable to meet their increased nutrient needs with food
- ▶ Older adults

Sources

1. 2019 CRN consumer survey on dietary supplements. www.crnusa.org/2019survey. Accessed February 18, 2021.
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3. Marra MV, Boya, AP. Position of the American Dietetic Association: nutrient supplementation. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2009;109(12):2073–2085.
4. Marra MV, Bailey RL. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: micronutrient supplementation. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2018;118(11):2162–2173.
5. Geller AI, Shehab N, Weidle NJ, et al. Emergency department visits for adverse events related to dietary supplements. *N Engl J Med*. 2015;373, 1531–1540.