

## Supplements

If you walk around your local pharmacy, health food shop or supermarket you will see a huge selection of vitamins, minerals and other nutritional supplements in a bewildering range of doses, formulas and combinations.

### What are supplements?

As the name implies supplements (dietary / nutritional) is any product that aims to 'supplement' the diet in nutrients that could potentially be missing. There are hundreds of different supplement products, from well know vitamins and minerals to bee pollen, green tea and ginkgo biloba. However do we really need these supplements or are they just a waste of money? How much should you have? Are they safe? Mixed messages from the media, family and friends can make things even more confusing. This Food Fact Sheet will help you decide.

### Who needs supplements

People take supplements for a wide variety of reasons, predominantly these reasons relate to health and improving health outcomes. However it is important to note that most people can get everything they need to be healthy by eating a varied, balanced diet.

#### You can do this by eating:

- plenty of fruits and vegetables – aim for a variety and at least 5-a-day
- plenty of starchy foods such as bread, potatoes, rice and pasta – include these with each meal
- some milk and dairy foods (or suitable dairy free alternative which is fortified with calcium) – adults need 2-3 servings a day to reach the recommended amount of calcium (if you are managing less than this consider talking to your doctor who may advise a supplement)
- some meat, fish, eggs, beans or other foods rich in protein
- limit foods which are high in salt, sugar and fat.

It is important to note that a healthy balanced diet doesn't just provide you with essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients, but also other elements which cannot be obtained from nutritional supplement. For example, fibre, which is essential for healthy gut function.

There are certain groups of people who may benefit from taking supplements.



**See the table overleaf to see who The Department of Health recommends take supplements.**

Some women who are pregnant or who have a baby under one year of age and children from six months of age until their fourth birthday may qualify for Healthy Start vitamins. Healthy Start women's vitamins contain folic acid, vitamin C and vitamin D and Healthy Start children's vitamin drops contain vitamins A, C & D. Speak to your doctor, midwife or health visitor to see if you qualify. If you think you are not having enough of one or more nutrients and are thinking about taking a supplement, always consult your doctor, or ask to see a dietitian.

### Choosing a supplement

- always buy supplements from a reputable source. For example your local chemist/pharmacy or supermarket, and not from an unknown company on the internet
- check the label – it should tell you the amount in each dose and should have an expiry date
- make sure you really need the supplement by asking your doctor, dietitian or pharmacist/chemist.

### Risks

Although most nutritional supplements are safe if taken in the correct doses, there are some risks.

**Quality** – internet products may not meet UK standards and may not have gone through the same checks as products from a more reliable source. There could be less of the active ingredient than claimed, or the product could contain ingredients harmful to your health.

**In some cases, a supplement have benefits, however they are not a substitute alternative for a healthy diet.**

Who?	Which supplement?	Why?
All children from six months to five years (in some cases breastfed babies from one month old)	7 – 8.5 micrograms of vitamin D (unless having 500ml fortified infant formula a day)	To prevent vitamin D deficiency
Women who are trying to conceive and women who are in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy	400 micrograms of folic acid daily	To reduce the risk of neural tube defects in the unborn baby
Women who have had a previous pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect or they or their partner have neural tube defect or women who have diabetes	5 mg of folic acid daily	To reduce the risk of neural tube defects in the unborn baby in this high risk group.
Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding	10 micrograms of vitamin D daily	To prevent vitamin D deficiency in both the mother and the baby
People aged 65 years and older	10 micrograms of vitamin D daily	To prevent vitamin D deficiency as they do not make enough under their skin
People with darker skin or who receive very little exposure to sunlight	10 micrograms of vitamin D daily	To prevent vitamin D deficiency as they not make enough under their skin

If you want to buy supplements via the web choose a recognised high street retailer that also trades online.

**Quantity** – taking too much of a vitamin can be dangerous. Some vitamins dissolve in water ‘water soluble’, and any that your body doesn’t need will leave your body when you pass urine. You cannot store ‘water soluble’ vitamins. Your body can store the fat soluble vitamins A, D, E & K though and you can become unwell if too much is taken.

You can make sure you don’t take too much of any vitamin by only ever taking the recommended dose on the label (unless advised by your doctor). If you take more than one supplement, make sure that you are not doubling up on any nutrients. For example, if you take a multivitamin tablet which includes vitamin D, don’t take an additional vitamin D supplement unless advised to by a health professional.

### Other risks

- Wasting your money! Supplements can be expensive and a lot of them have no proven benefits at all. They may claim to delay ageing, boost your metabolism or make you slimmer but in fact there is little or no evidence to back up many of these claims.
- Supplements may have interactions with some medication and some are unsafe if you suffer from certain medical conditions.

This is why it is important to talk to your doctor before taking any supplements.

- Fish liver oil should not be taken by pregnant women as it contains vitamin A; large amounts can be harmful to babies.
- Vitamin E supplements should be avoided by people with cardiovascular disease as it can increase the risk of further heart attacks.
- Effervescent (fizzy) vitamin supplements contain approximately a gram of salt per tablet. Therefore you might want to consider changing to a non-effervescent alternative, especially if you have been advised to limit your salt intake.

### Summary

Most people can get all of the vitamins and minerals they need from a balanced diet and some time in the sunlight. In some cases, a supplement have benefits, however they are not a substitute alternative for a healthy diet. Before taking a supplement, make sure your information is reliable and speak to your doctor, dietitian or pharmacist/chemist.

### Further information:

Food Fact Sheets on other topics including *Vitamin D and Calcium*, are available at:

[www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)



This Food Factsheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian. If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or: [www.freelancedietitians.org](http://www.freelancedietitians.org) for a private dietitian.

To check your dietitian is registered visit [www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org)

This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at [www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

Written by Eloise Garrison, Dietitian. Reviewed by Lucy Jackman, Dietitian.

The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at [www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

© BDA March 2016. Review date: March 2019.

