

Education

Vitamins

What are vitamins?

Vitamins are chemicals needed in tiny amounts to keep you healthy. For example, you have probably heard of vitamins A, B, C, D, E, and K. You get vitamins from food, and some are made by the body.

More than 200 years ago, it was found that a serious disease called scurvy could be prevented on long sea voyages by giving sailors citrus fruit each day. Scurvy and other diseases are caused by a lack of vitamins. Fruit provides vitamins and can help prevent such diseases.

A healthy diet is the best way to ensure proper nutrition. However, you may improve your health by taking a vitamin or mineral supplement if:

- A health condition keeps your body from absorbing nutrients or requires a special diet.
- You do not have a healthy diet because you do not eat enough foods or you do not eat enough different types of foods.
- You are pregnant and you want to reduce the risk of a neural tube defect in your baby by taking prenatal vitamins with folate.
- You are 65 or older and you want to reduce the risk of infections and improve your immune system.
- You are a woman who has been through menopause and you want some protection against osteoporosis by taking mineral supplements.
- You are taking certain medicines or abusing alcohol or narcotics and you need supplements to replenish key nutrients and improve your health.

Follow these basic guidelines if you take supplements:

- Avoid a dosage that is too high by choosing a multivitamin supplement that provides about 100% of the daily value of the vitamins and minerals included in the supplement.
- Be sure the product label shows approval by the US Pharmacopeia (USP).
- Store all vitamins in a cool, dry place.
- Check with your health care provider, pharmacist, or dietitian before taking supplements, especially if you take prescription medicine or are being treated for a health problem.

Why is vitamin A important?

Vitamin A is needed for growth and for strong bones and teeth. As you grow older, it helps keep your skin and eyes healthy. Vitamin A is present in liver, fish liver oils, dairy products, dark green and yellow-orange vegetables, and in fruits. Too much vitamin A may cause symptoms that include headache, itchy skin, and hair loss.

What does vitamin B do for me?

There are several vitamins in the B group. They play a part in many of the internal processes that make our bodies function properly. Vitamins in the B group are present in meats, dairy products, nuts, grains, and leaf vegetables. Too much vitamin B6 can cause nerve inflammation.

Why do I need vitamin C?

Vitamin C helps build healthy tissues. It also plays a role in the healing process. It is found in fruit (especially citrus fruit and cantaloupes) and vegetables, such as tomatoes, potatoes, and green peppers. It is widely believed that large doses of vitamin C can help prevent colds, but this has not been proven. Too much vitamin C can cause diarrhea and kidney stones.

What about vitamin D?

Vitamin D builds strong bones and teeth and helps prevent osteoporosis as you grow older. Vitamin D is present in dairy products, oily fish, liver, and egg yolk. Sunlight is another source of vitamin D. Too much vitamin D can cause digestive

upsets, depression, and calcium deposits in the kidneys and blood vessels.

Why should I take vitamin E?

Vitamin E helps the cells in your body stay healthy. It also helps you form new red blood cells. It is present in nuts, seeds, plant oils, meat, grains, and egg yolk. Too much vitamin E can upset your stomach and can keep your body from absorbing vitamins A, D, and K.

Why is vitamin K important?

Vitamin K is needed to help your blood clot after an injury. It is found in leafy vegetables (especially the cabbage family), vegetable oils, egg yolk, pork, and liver. Vitamin K is also made by bacteria that live in the intestine.

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