

Supplements: Making the Right Choice

Perhaps the most oft-asked question is “What supplements should I take”? While not answered simply, each individual has different requirements warranting different supplementation protocols to fit their specific needs. Supplementation is not a one-fits-all operation by any means. Level of fitness, overall health, gender, diet, performance goals, symptoms and many other factors are all figured into supplement selection.

Perhaps one of the most cost-effective forms of “health insurance” available to everyone is a multivitamin/mineral supplement. The true purpose of taking a multivitamin/mineral (MVM) is to ensure that your body receives 100% of what it needs for proper function. Unless one eats a perfect diet day in and day out, a MVM is necessary to patch any ‘holes’ in the diet. And even if one does eat a perfect diet, factors ranging from fitness levels, type, intensity and duration of training, stress levels, and absorption states of the body, can all influence how much of the essential nutrients our bodies need each day. One of the greatest false accusations against taking supplements is that “it’s all being lost through urination”. True, some supplements (especially those containing any of the B vitamins) tend to make urine more colorful; however, it must be duly noted that the human body is not 100% efficient (in fact it is more like 30% efficient, similar to a gasoline engine!) and therefore cannot absorb all of the food and drink that is consumed each day. Hence, our daily bathroom habits. So, just because a portion of the supplement is visible in the urine, does not mean that your body isn’t absorbing and using all of those nutrients. Keep in mind that the RDAs (Recommended Daily Allowances) listed on packages are designed to ensure that the large majority of the population will not be deficient. Or in other words, the RDAs are designed to prevent deficiency states, not to optimize health!

The choices available today are certainly overwhelming. It seems that supplements are everywhere, each with it’s own fantastic claim. There are several reasons for this, however what is important is that as consumers, we must be as savvy when making health-related choices as we are (hopefully) when making other economic decisions. With a loosely regulated field and slick marketing, it’s important to choose supplement companies judiciously to assure that we receive exactly what we intend to purchase. No more. No less. Fantastic claims used to sell products are quite common in the supplement industry. If it sounds too good to be true, then guess what-it is!

Because both vitamins and minerals cannot be made in the body, they must be obtained outside of the body from foods and supplements. Despite popular opinion that one can obtain all the vitamins and minerals from diet alone, different people have different requirements. Especially those that use extra calories; they will ‘burn’ through more of these nutrient necessitating extra required amounts. Ever have a tough race or series of workouts and despite eating adequately, still have a nagging craving, fatigue or slow recovery? This is the body’s cry for more nutrients. This being said, active individuals

require more energy than others making supplementation an important part of the health regimen. Research has shown that many athletes in fact do not have adequate intakes of vitamins and minerals.

There are several quality indicators consumers can rely on. One place to start is looking at what a supplement does **not** have. Today's choices include Kosher, vegetarian, and hypoallergenic (yeast, starch, sugar, dairy, wheat, and dairy-free) supplements. Unnecessary ingredients include artificial coloring agents, fillers, binders and even coatings; all of which are included to make the vitamin visually appealing and to hold large doses together.

- **Pricing:** If it seems outrageous, than it is. This goes for both very expensive supplements and very cheap supplements. Some supplements are grossly overpriced and these are often easy to spot. On the other hand, if the supplement you select seems incredibly cheap, well then you may be getting what you are paying for, not much. (The cost of vitamins largely depends on the amount of nutrients included, and the type. Well-absorbed nutrients cost more than ones that do not absorb well...hence a poor choice of supplement).
- **Dose:** Dosing recommendations range from one-a-day to 6 a day. A one-a-day supplement is probably fine...however oftentimes when they are packaged this way they contain binders as part of their nature-in order to jam all of those nutrients in that one pill, binders are necessary to hold it all together. Because of this, there is speculation that these supplements may be very difficult for your body to digest and assimilate due to the 'glue' holding the vitamin together. At the other end of the spectrum, many manufacturers recommend up to 6 capsules a day. These will often have the same *amount* of nutrients as the one-a-day. This can be tedious of course, because after all, aren't you taking vitamins so you don't have to take all of those other pills? And with some brands recommending 6 a day, there is speculation that this recommendation is made to enhance the 'more is better' mentality-so prevalent today.
- **Getting help:** consult a physician that is knowledgeable about supplementation and clinical nutrition...remember not ALL doctors are trained in this specialty. Speak with a doctor that is trained in preventive medicine, rather than covering symptoms with drugs.
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