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A leading health expert tells...

How To Get The Nutrients You Need

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Eating well shouldn't be a mystery. And yet it can seem thoroughly confusing. Even though I've been teaching nutrition for decades, I have a hard time keeping all the details—and the conflicting research—straight.

Still, it pays to understand the basics. When you do, you can make good choices for yourself and your family, and you'll be able to evaluate the latest nutrition news. Here's what you need to know:

- Nutrients keep us alive by helping our bodies function properly.
- There are more than 50 different nutrients—"chemicals" such as vitamins, minerals, fatty acids and amino acids. Our bodies need all of them all the time.
- We get all the nutrients in foods that we commonly eat. There's no need to seek out exotic, expensive, seasonal or other "special" foods.
- No single food other than breast milk supplies every nutrient. To get all the essential nutrients (a redundancy if there ever was one), you must eat a wide variety of relatively unprocessed foods, which come straight from the earth, trees or animals.

Know Your ABCs

With only a few exceptions, any food that has not been heavily processed contains most nutrients, although in widely varying amounts. Green peppers, for example, are especially high in vitamin C, and dairy products are especially high in calcium—but both nutrients also are found in a great many other foods, just in smaller amounts.

"Plant foods," however, are the only good sources of vitamin C, fiber and antioxidants, which is why it is so important to eat fruits, vegetables and whole grains. And only animals provide vitamin B12, so you need some meat, dairy, eggs or fish in your diet. If you do not eat any of those foods (some strict vegetarians do not), you need B12 supplements or B12-fortified products.

Processing strips away nutrients, which is why so many packaged foods are "enriched" or "fortified." Enriched means adding back a few (never all) of the vitamins and minerals that were lost during processing. For example, when whole wheat is converted to white flour, most of the nutrients in wheat are removed. By law, five (thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folic acid and iron) are put back during the enrichment process. So, anything made with white flour is very

likely to be deficient in the other nutrients. Fortified means adding nutrients that were not naturally present, as in vitamin D-fortified milk.

How likely are we to suffer from nutritional deficiencies? Not very. Because despite our less than perfect diets (and the prevalence of processed foods on the nation's supermarket shelves), most Americans eat more than enough to get the vitamins and minerals they need. However, iron deficiency is still seen among low-income children, women of childbearing age and the elderly.

People who are heavier or more active—specifically men, pregnant women and athletes—need more nutrients than others. The good news is that they usually get them, because men, pregnant women and athletes tend to eat more. Young women of childbearing age in particular should eat well-balanced diets with plenty of folic acid and iron.

Of course, not everyone eats healthfully every day, and this is where supplements come in.

Supplements—When And How Much?

If you are like many Americans, you already take multivitamins or other supplements at least occasionally. You probably take them because you don't always eat carefully, you have concerns that today's food supply is not as nutritious as it used to be, and you want to make sure you get the vitamins and minerals you need—all perfectly good reasons. Such reasons explain why many doctors recommend taking a daily multivitamin as "nutritional insurance," especially for those most vulnerable to deficiencies: young children, pregnant women and the elderly, who don't absorb nutrients as well as younger people.

Multivitamins generally combine up to 100% of daily recommendations for 20 or more vitamins and minerals in a single pill. By comparison, some cereals give you 100% of the recommended values for eight to 12 key nutrients in a single serving—the equivalent of some multivitamins.

When you see multivitamins lined up on the shelf, they can look confusingly different, but they are all basically alike. The differences are less important than the similarities. When shopping for any kind of supplement, look for reputable brands and select the ones for your gender and age group. (Adult men and postmenopausal women do not need iron; kids need lower levels of nutrients than teens or adults.) And remember: If you're cutting down on food to lose weight, you're also taking in fewer nutrients. The bottom line is that multivitamins are useful for anyone who is not eating very much.

Whether supplements make you healthier is another matter. People who take them are typically healthy to begin with, eat well, are physically active and do not smoke.

More Is Not Always Better

Multivitamins are safe, and the reassurance they provide could be good for your health all on its own. But, as science increasingly shows, taking more than the recommended dose is not necessarily better. Small amounts of supplements are safest and most effective.

On the other hand, did you know that you never can get too much of a nutrient from food? Which is one way of saying that you never can get too much of a good thing.

In a nutshell

You probably are getting enough nutrients if you:

Like fruits and vegetables.

Choose whole grains.

Eat small amounts of many different kinds of foods.

Don't follow food fads that restrict one or another food category.

Don't eat much junk food.