

Sunday June 26, 2011

# A supplementary question

## WOMEN'S WORLD

By DR NOR ASHIKIN MOKHTAR

### Are supplements really useful for better health?

AS we become more health-conscious, our thoughts are turning more and more to the challenges of maintaining a nutritious and balanced diet amidst the stressful lifestyles we lead today.

In our daily lives, juggling family responsibilities and work takes up so much of our time and energy that nutrition becomes the last thing on our minds.



Vitamin supplements may help to fill some of the gaps in our daily nutrition that we are not getting from food, but it cannot be expected to replace the primary role of a nutritious diet. – Photos.com

We resort to instant meals, processed foods, and eating out for convenience. Unfortunately, these probably compromise our nutrient intake and leave us vulnerable to diseases and weaknesses.

Vitamin supplements seem like a quick-fix answer to this dilemma. But we must be wise and practical when it comes to dietary supplements, and we must understand that there is no shortcut to good health.

### What good are they?

It seems that everyone now knows about the benefits of vitamins and minerals in our diet.

These are the micronutrients that work in vast and mysterious ways to preserve health, prevent infections and diseases of deficiency, and even slow down the effects of ageing.

Each vitamin and mineral has specific functions in the body.

You probably know about how vitamin A ensures healthy vision, and vitamin C strengthens the immune system.

The B group of vitamins have a variety of functions, including the development of red blood cells, supporting metabolism, and providing energy, while vitamin D helps the body to absorb calcium.

The minerals, including calcium, zinc, iron, iodine, and selenium, also play significant roles in carrying out important processes in your body.

All these vitamins and minerals are found in many different types of foods we eat, but most abundantly in fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains.

There is no single food that contains all the vitamins and minerals, so that is why a variety of foods is recommended in a healthy diet.

Fresh and natural foods are also believed to be richer in vitamins and minerals, compared to preserved and processed foods. However, thanks to modern food technology, a lot of the processed foods on our supermarket shelves, such as bread, cereal and milk, are now also fortified with basic vitamins and minerals.

But are we getting enough vitamins and minerals in our daily diet?

While we are all familiar with the exhortation to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables, each, every day, I do not imagine that everyone is able to fulfil that recommendation.

## **Who needs supplements?**

So, are vitamin supplements the answer then? Do we pop a pill or two a day, instead of an apple a day?

The answer is not as simple as that – vitamin supplements may help to fill some of the gaps in our daily nutrition that we are not getting from food, but it cannot be expected to replace the primary role of a nutritious diet.

It is quite difficult for a person to follow dietary guidelines strictly, and this can make it a challenge to meet the required amounts of vitamins and minerals for optimum health.

If you think that you are not getting enough nutrients through your diet, multivitamins can offer a little insurance to help top up some of these essential nutrients.

Some people even have specific needs for certain vitamins, which are best met through supplementation.

A good example is women who are trying to conceive or are pregnant – they need more folic acid, which helps to prevent neural tube defects in their unborn baby. Ideally, women of child-bearing years should begin taking folic acid supplementation even before they conceive, or as early as possible in their pregnancy.

However, supplements can never replicate the virtues of a proper diet, from eating natural, whole foods.

This is because the vitamins and minerals that exist naturally in foods interact with one another, as well as with other nutrients, to produce benefits in ways that we do not yet fully understand.

By taking a vitamin alone, we may not be unlocking its full potential.

People also tend to think that vitamin supplements are a license to live unhealthily. That is certainly not true.

The word “supplement” itself should be a clue that it is meant to complement a good diet and healthy lifestyle.

So don't expect to get any benefits if you pop a multivitamin every day, while continuing to eat junk food and smoke cigarettes.

## **Supplement safety**

Many people think that dietary or vitamin supplements are completely safe because they are ‘natural’, as opposed to medications.

This is deceptive thinking, because if you take supplements in the wrong amounts or for the wrong reasons, it could cause an overdose and lead to organ toxicity.

In particular, vitamins D, A, and B6 can be dangerous when taken in extremely large amounts for a long time.

The best thing to do is to consult your doctor, a dietitian or a nutritionist for advice before buying supplements.

Ask them what supplements would be most appropriate for your health needs and lifestyle.

You should buy from reputable supplement manufacturers, to ensure that the products are scientifically formulated and tested properly for safety.

Learn to read and understand the labels on vitamin supplement products, so that you can distinguish between advertising claims and genuine benefits.

Some products will promise that they can cure or prevent diseases, but these types of claims are not allowed and should not be trusted.

They can only make claims about how the vitamins or minerals contained within can affect certain functions in the body.

Be careful about giving dietary supplements to children and teenagers, especially specific vitamin and mineral supplements. Talk to their doctor or paediatrician first to ensure that it is safe and will not cause any toxicity to your child's body.

Finally, do not forsake a healthy diet and all the good habits in life that you already know about!

There is no pill out there that can replace the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, fish, nuts, seeds, legumes and dairy products.

There is no need to spend all your money on expensive dietary supplements, if you continue to smoke, abuse alcohol, and live as a couch potato.

If you wish to pop multivitamin pills, take them as they are meant to be used – to supplement your healthy choices.

*> Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar is a consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist (FRCOG, UK). For further information, visit [www.primanora.com](http://www.primanora.com). The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*