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# To supplement or not?

## WOMEN'S WORLD

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### **A woman's guide to vitamins and minerals.**

IF you think vitamins are just those orange tablets that fizz when you drop them into water, you need to read this article!

Vitamins and minerals are nutrients in our food that are essential in making sure that every cell, tissue and organ in our body are functioning just the way they are supposed to. If you are lacking in any one of these vitamins or minerals, your body will start letting you down.

At first, you might just feel a little tired and run-down. Then, you may find yourself becoming ill more often, and taking a longer time to recover from these bouts of illnesses. You find it hard to focus on important things, and feel too worn-out to perform tasks that used to be so easy.

And that's just what you can see – what you can't see is the long-term effect of the lack of vitamins and minerals in your body.

### **Essential compounds**

Vitamins and minerals are always mentioned together, like they are inseparable best friends. This is because you need all of them – not just one or the other – for your body to stay healthy. Some of them also have to work together to enhance each other's usefulness.

Vitamins are organic chemical compounds made by plants or animals, while minerals are inorganic elements that come from the soil and water (which are then absorbed by plants or eaten by animals).

Vitamins act as catalysts for the hundreds of biochemical reactions that go on continuously in the body. They are divided into water-soluble types or fat-soluble types – depending on whether they are stored in the watery or fatty parts of body cells.

Minerals, on the other hand, are divided into macrominerals and trace minerals. Macrominerals include calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, sodium, potassium, chloride and sulphur, and are needed in large amounts. Trace minerals, such as manganese, copper, iodine, zinc and selenium, are only needed in small amounts.

Each vitamin and mineral carries out specific functions, with some responsible for multiple functions in the body. Since there are 13 essential vitamins and 15 essential minerals, there won't be space in this article to explain each individual function! Suffice to say that you can't neglect any of them in your diet.

The next question is: how much of each vitamin and mineral do you need? There are specific levels required for each vitamin and mineral, so that our body can continue to function optimally.

In Malaysia, the Health Ministry has recommendations about the right amount of vitamins and minerals we need every day, called the Recommended Nutrient Intake (RNI).

However, you don't need to memorise these recommended intake levels, or bring a long list around with you whenever you eat or buy food. The easy way to get all the vitamins and minerals you need? From a healthy and balanced diet, of course!

### **Getting them from food**

It may be difficult to try to eat a proper diet when you're so busy working, taking care of the house and raising your children. You may find yourself skipping lunch, or buying the same take-away food for dinner every night.

Luckily, we're living in a modern age where many of the foods we eat, such as cereals, breads and milk, are fortified with essential vitamins and minerals. So we do not have serious deficiency problems as our ancestors may have had.

However, you still need to take a good look at every meal you're having, to see whether it fulfils the three basic principles: healthy, balanced and variety. Here are some tips to remember:

- Go with the pyramid. Your daily meals should contain the most foods from the lowest level of the Food Guide Pyramid, which are carbohydrate foods like rice, bread, wholegrain cereals and noodles. Make sure you also have plenty of fruits and vegetables, protein foods (lean meat, fish, legumes and dairy products) in moderation, and fats and oils least of all.

- More fruits and veggies. Make the five-a-day rule your mantra – in other words, have five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. One serving of fruits can be half a medium-sized guava, one whole orange, pear or apple, one medium-sized banana, or one slice of papaya, pineapple or watermelon. One serving of vegetables equals half a cup of cooked dark green leafy vegetables with edible stems, or half a cup of cooked fruit or root vegetables.

We are lucky to live in Malaysia – our wide variety of local fruits and vegetables are wonderfully rich in nutrients!

- Don't overcook or boil. Don't destroy the vitamins in your vegetables by overcooking or boiling them (boiling causes the vitamins and minerals from your food to leach out into the water). Whenever you can, try to eat fruits, vegetables and grains in their natural raw or unprocessed state. You can also steam or microwave them.

- Don't expose to air. Did you know that air and sunlight can "steal" vitamins and minerals from food? Instead of leaving fruits and vegetables exposed, or in glass bottles, store them in airtight, opaque containers.

### **To supplement or not?**

With the dizzying array of supplements that line pharmacy shelves, you can't help but wonder: Should I be taking all of these?

Vitamin and mineral supplements are useful if you are unable to meet the recommended levels for any reason, such as an illness, pregnancy or old age. However, if you are able to eat a balanced diet of fresh foods, you probably will not need supplements.

Remember that supplements cannot be used as a substitute for poor eating habits. Don't skip meals, binge-eat or eat junk because you think that you can make up for it by popping a pill. No supplement is able to replicate the natural goodness of whole, fresh foods.

It is better to take a once-a-day multivitamin with minerals, rather than to take single supplements containing only one type of vitamin or mineral, unless it has been prescribed to you for medical reasons. You may overdose on single supplements, and suffer toxicity problems like organ damage.

Always read the labels on the bottle to know what and how much vitamins and minerals are in the pills. Do not be taken in by overly fantastic health or nutritional claims that are made by some supplement manufacturers.

You should always ask a dietitian or nutritionist for advice about supplements, so that they can help you figure out what you are lacking, and what is the best type of supplement for you.

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