

# Vitamins: **Feast** or Famine?



**T**he debate on whether to supplement your diet with vitamins and minerals continues to rage with proponents on both sides advising for and against such supplements. According to some in the medical profession, simply eating a well-balanced diet should provide all the vitamins and minerals your body needs.

"This is generally what most dietitians recommend, but it depends a lot on the person's diet," says Joanne Fischenich-Herd, RD, chief clinical dietitian for John C. Lincoln Health Network. "It's always best to get your (vitamins and minerals) from food, but not everyone can do that because not everyone eats a well-balanced diet."

Ivyonne Cottrell, RD, CDE, clinical dietitian for the Mayo Clinic Scottsdale, agrees that having a good and varied diet is an acceptable way to make sure you don't overdo it in any of the nutrients. "It's a good way to make sure you don't get too much of one thing and not enough of something else," she says. "Another reason we prefer you get your nutrients from your foods is there are other nutrients which are not found in supplements, such as phytochemicals, which occur naturally in foods. There is a lot of research being done (on phytochemicals) now, and there may be a lot of health benefits from those chemicals."

But Everett Beyer, DC, D.A.C.B.N., a board-certified clinical nutritionist at La Vida Chiropractic in Phoenix, does not believe the food available today is nutrient-rich enough to give our bodies the vitamins and minerals necessary. "You can exist in this country on a typical, standard American diet, and you'll get some vitamins in that," he says. "But it's important to realize that you are getting fewer vitamins in the same food that you would have 50 years ago, due to the depletion of the soil." ►

by Cynthia Scanlon





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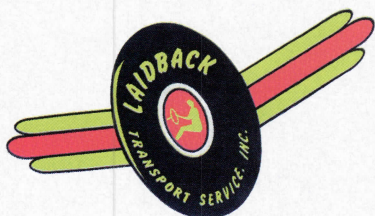


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Beyer believes people need to supplement their diets with vitamins and minerals to stay healthy, particularly for individuals with a family history of degenerative diseases. "If you want optimum health and optimum protection for your cells, tissues and organs, you'll need to take more vitamins than what you can get in food."

With the proper vitamins and minerals from both food and supplements, Beyer believes you can help reduce your risks of degenerative types of diseases including cancer and heart disease.

While the vitamin debate is not new, the controversy began really heating up in 1994 when The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act was passed.

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In essence, the Act removed dietary supplements from premarket safety evaluations required of most food ingredients and drugs. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) now has no authority to regulate the safety of nutritional supplements before they are on the market and only has the authority to intervene when someone becomes sick or injured.

"So dietary supplements are on their own," says Fischenich-Herd. "The health food industry is a big and powerful industry. When this came up, I heard consumers say, 'We don't want the government saying we can't take our vitamin C.' And the government went along with that."

Herbs also fall under the Act and are not regulated by the FDA either. "Because there is no regulation, one time you may be

getting a very small dose (of herb) and the next time a very large dose by taking the exact same product," says Cottrell.

Despite the lack of regulation, Beyer is adamant that people wishing to stay healthy are going to need to take preventive measures with their health, and that includes vitamin and mineral supplements.

"If a person eats a typical, American diet, they are going to end up with typical, American health problems," he says. "And we are coming to a time in our country where we can't afford that. So the key is going to be prevention."

He adds, "The research is there to definitely support supplement nutrition, particularly for reduction of some of the degenerative types of diseases. We're talking about not just treating things, but preventing."

As if the debate weren't confusing enough, what and how much to eat has come under some controversy as well. The four food groups, once the bastion of standard nutrition, has been replaced with the new revised food pyramid which now includes six groups with a completely reshuffled significance.

Where once meat was stressed in the diet, now breads, grains, and pastas have moved to the forefront, with an emphasis on plenty of fruits and vegetables. Currently, it is recommended that five servings of fruits and vegetables be eaten each day. "A very small percentage of Americans do that, but it is possible," says Cottrell. For some, the new food pyramid is a complete departure from what was taught to children. "This is totally opposite from the way most of us have been brought up," Cottrell agrees. Now, "meat should be more of a side dish than a main meal." And, she adds, "Fats can be incorporated in the diet, but it should make up the smallest part of our diet."

Part of the reason the vitamin and mineral debate continues, says Cottrell, is Americans typically look for an easier way out, especially when it involves nutrition. "In this country, we are always looking for a quick fix," she says. "We figure we can eat terribly and then take a pill for something. Unfortunately it doesn't work that way with nutrition."

Still, certain groups of people, who may not be eating as well as they should, may need to balance their dietary intake with vitamins and minerals. These people include people 65 and older; people taking certain medications that may interfere with the body's ability to use vitamins and minerals properly; people on a strict weight-loss diet; people who have diseases of the digestive tract; smokers; people who drink alcoholic beverages to excess; pregnant or breast-feeding women, and strict vegetarians who have limited milk intake and limited exposure to the sun.

Fischenich-Herd goes along with the need for these risk groups to take a particular look at their diet for possible vitamin and supplement requirements. "People who are eating less than 1,200 calories a day will find it hard to get everything they need," she says. And there is a lot of nutrient deficiencies with people who drink too much. (Drinking) affects absorption and utilization of nutrients."

Another group at risk, according to Fischenich-Herd, are people who live lives constantly on-the-go and get their meals through a fast-food window. Dining behind the wheel of a car can catch up to the body, she says. "A lot of vitamins come from fruits and vegetables, which most people just don't take the time to get," she says. "If you're running through a fast-food place, you might get a leaf of lettuce or a slice of tomato on your burger, and a lot of people eat that way." But that's just not



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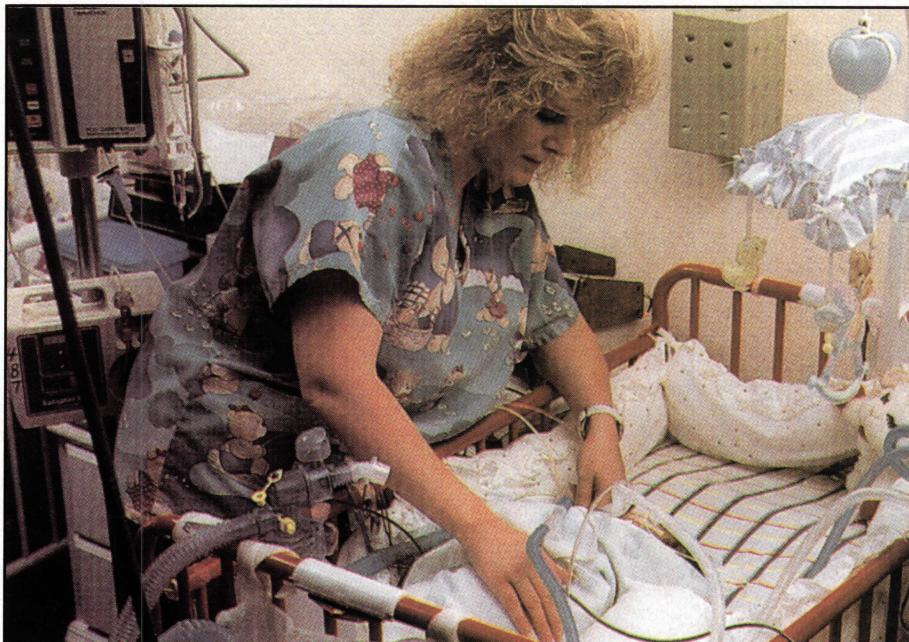
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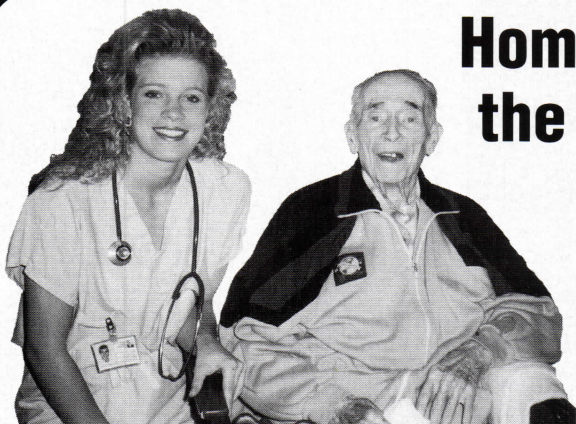
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enough nutrients for the body, she adds.

Also, high doses of some vitamins and herbal supplements can have serious side effects. "In this society, we tend to think if a little bit is good, a lot more will be better," she says. "We need vitamins and minerals in tiny amounts in the body. Yes, we want to prevent against deficiencies, but taking more isn't going to cure any diseases."

And while she agrees that there are some vitamins and minerals which, if taken in larger doses, may help protect against cancers and cardiovascular disease, she stresses those amounts should be decided upon with the recommendation of a physician. Taking megadoses of vitamins that are stored in the body's fat, such as vitamins A, D, E and K can be dangerous

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and toxic, she says.

"By taking a supplement rather than eating a piece of fruit or vegetable, you may be missing out on a lot of things we don't know about yet that may be even more beneficial for our health," Cottrell says.

Clearly, the debate on vitamin and mineral supplements isn't going to clear up anytime soon. The bottom line? Talk with your doctor or dietitian to see whether a vitamin program is for you.

If you are still unsure, but think you really might want to take some kinds of vitamins, Cottrell suggests just taking a simple multi-vitamin everyday. "If you're healthy, you probably don't need it," she says.

**AB**

*Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe free-lance writer.*