

# Chapter 4

## TO SUPPLEMENT OR NOT TO SUPPLEMENT

What vitamins and minerals do I really need?

What about other supplements – herbal and botanical supplements, fibre and meal replacements, for example?





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Vitamins and minerals are important for good health at any age. But some become even more important as you get older – particularly vitamins B6, B12, C and D, as well as folate, calcium and magnesium.

You can get enough of most of these vitamins and minerals by eating the foods recommended in Canada's Food Guide (Appendix B). For some vitamins and minerals, however, you may need to take a good multivitamin/mineral supplement or eat fortified foods (foods with added vitamins and minerals).

Remember, however, that a supplement is intended to add to what you eat, not to replace healthy eating.

Remember, too, that it's easy to get carried away with the latest fad. New research comes out practically every day on the benefits of different vitamins, minerals and other supplements, and you may be feeling overwhelmed by ads on TV and in newspapers telling you about the latest miracle.

Before jumping on the latest bandwagon, consult with your doctor or a dietitian. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.) Also read Chapter 10, How do I know I am getting reliable information?, for tips about how you can tell if a product is good for you to take.

### What vitamins and minerals do I really need?

#### Vitamin B12

Your body needs vitamin B12 to form healthy red blood cells and to keep your nervous system – the control centre of your body – working normally. This vitamin helps you feel energetic and alert.

When you were young, your body could obtain all the vitamin B12 it needed from natural sources, including meat, fish, poultry, eggs, milk, yogurt and cheese. But as you get older, your body does not absorb vitamin B12 as well.



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Anyone over age 50 needs about 2.5 mcgs of B12 a day. Because many people over that age do not absorb the vitamin very well, we recommend that you eat foods fortified with B12, such as veggie meats (tofu patties, for example) and fortified soy beverages, or take a multivitamin/mineral that contains B12.

### Vitamin B6

Vitamin B6 functions much like B12, except that it also helps maintain your blood glucose (also called blood sugar, your body's main source of energy) within a normal range.

Good sources of vitamin B6 include:

- green beans
- beef, chicken, fish
- bananas
- fortified cereals.

However, many seniors do not get enough vitamin B6 through the foods they eat.

If you are not eating many foods that contain B6, or you are not eating much in general, we recommend you take a multivitamin/mineral supplement with B6.

### Folate/folic acid

Folate is another B vitamin. Folic acid is the form of folate found in vitamin supplements.

If you do not get enough folate, you may not form enough red blood cells. This

### Which multivitamin/ mineral supplement is the best?

Choose a multivitamin/mineral that is specifically intended for people over 50 and take it as directed.

Some people assume that, when it comes to vitamins, more is always better and they will take more than the recommended dose. But you can get too much of a good thing. Large amounts of certain vitamins and minerals can be harmful to your health.

## Are you getting enough calcium?

The BC Dairy Foundation's Calcium Calculator will tell you how much calcium you are getting from your diet.

Go to [www.bcdairyfoundation.ca](http://www.bcdairyfoundation.ca) or call 1 800 242-6455.

can lead to the blood condition called anemia, which will make you feel very tired. Folate may also help prevent some types of cancer.

Seniors need 400 mcgs of folate a day. The best way to get that amount is to eat foods high in folate, such as beans, lentils, dark green leafy vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds. If you do not eat these high-folate foods regularly, we recommend you take a multivitamin/mineral with folic acid.

### Calcium and vitamin D

Calcium works together with other bone-building nutrients – particularly vitamin D, which helps your body absorb calcium – to maintain strong and healthy bones and teeth.

Eating foods rich in calcium and vitamin D throughout your life, combined with regular physical activity, will help prevent osteoporosis. With osteoporosis, your bones become smaller, more fragile and more likely to break. In Canada, one in four women and one in eight men over the age of 50 has osteoporosis. (See Chapter 5 for more about osteoporosis.)

Recent studies have also shown that eating foods rich in calcium and vitamin D will help protect against muscle weakness, which in turn will help prevent falls.

Seniors should consume 1200 mgs of calcium and 600 international units (IU) of vitamin D a day from food sources and/or supplements. If you already have osteoporosis, your doctor may recommend even higher amounts of calcium and vitamin D.

### An easy trick

Even if you take a calcium supplement, you should not stop eating calcium-rich foods!

One easy way to add calcium and other important nutrients to your diet: sprinkle some skim-milk powder over your cereal or mix it into your soup.



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Including milk, yogurt and cheese every day is the easiest way to make sure that you get the recommended amount of calcium. Other good sources of calcium include:

- soy beverages and orange juice fortified with calcium
- firm tofu made with calcium sulfate
- salmon and sardines with bones, and
- almonds and sesame seeds.

Vegetables such as turnip greens, bok choy, kale and broccoli also provide calcium, but in smaller amounts.

The major source of vitamin D is sunlight. However, because Canada is a northern country, it can sometimes be hard for you to get as much sunlight as you should. About 15 minutes of sunlight twice a week between April and September is enough for your body to make vitamin D. But from October to March, the Canadian sunlight is too weak, and you need to look for other sources of vitamin D.

Good sources of vitamin D include:

- foods fortified with vitamin D, such as milk, soy beverages and margarine
- oily or fatty fish, such as salmon, eulachon and herring
- fish liver oils, and
- egg yolks.

Because many seniors do not get the recommended amount of vitamin D from the food they eat, Canada's Food Guide recommends seniors take a vitamin D supplement of 400 IU a day. Because many seniors also do not get enough calcium

### Watch Out!

Avoid calcium supplements made from bone meal, dolomite, fossil or oyster shells because they may contain lead.

Avoid coral calcium if you are allergic to shellfish.

from their diets, we suggest you talk with your doctor or a dietitian. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.) Your doctor or a dietitian can help you determine if you are getting enough calcium and can also tell you whether you need a calcium supplement in addition to a vitamin D supplement, and how much you should take.

If your doctor or dietitian says you should take a calcium supplement, then you must be careful to choose the right one.

We recommend choosing either calcium carbonate or calcium citrate in whatever form you like: chewable, liquid or caplet/tablet. Antacids, made from calcium carbonate, are fine too. Many calcium supplements also include vitamin D.

Do not take more than 500 to 600 mgs of calcium at any one time. Try a different brand or a different form of calcium if you experience stomach upset, constipation or nausea.

Take your calcium with plenty of water. If you choose to take calcium carbonate, take it with your meals or immediately after eating. Calcium citrate is absorbed well at any time.

#### Vitamin C and vitamin E

Vitamin C helps your body form collagen, something it needs to make skin, tendons, ligaments and blood vessels. It is essential, too, for healing wounds and for repairing and maintaining bones and teeth.

Vitamin C is also – along with vitamin E – what is known as an antioxidant. Antioxidants are substances that block some of the damage caused by free radicals, which are created when your body transforms food into energy. Antioxidants may also help prevent cancer and heart disease.

#### Smokers

If you smoke, you need more vitamin C than non-smokers. Try to add an extra serving of fruit or vegetables high in vitamin C every day.

If you're ready to quit, help is available.

Call QuitNow at 1 877 455-2233 or visit [www.quitnow.ca](http://www.quitnow.ca).



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The recommended daily amount of vitamin C is 90 mgs (for men) or 75 mgs (for women), with an additional 35 mgs for smokers. The recommended daily amount of vitamin E is 15 mgs for both men and women.

Good sources of vitamin C include:

- oranges and orange juice
- apple juice
- strawberries
- kiwi fruit
- broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- red and green peppers, and
- potatoes and tomatoes.

Good sources of vitamin E include:

- vegetable oils
- wheatgerm
- nuts and nut butters (like peanut butter)
- sunflower seeds
- sweet potatoes, and leafy greens
- papayas and avocados

### You can take too much!

A multivitamin/mineral is most likely all your body needs. However, if you choose to take more vitamin C, be careful.

You should take no more than 2000 mgs of vitamin C a day.

In addition, recent studies show that vitamin E supplements do not appear to be necessary for most Canadians. You most likely get enough vitamin E through your diet.

If you do take a vitamin E supplement, make sure it is no more than 1000 mgs a day.

If you are not eating a variety of foods, or you are not sure about how well you are eating, talk with your doctor or a dietitian. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.) He or she may recommend a vitamin/mineral supplement.

### Iron

Iron helps to carry oxygen to all parts of your body so you can move and breathe efficiently. Too little iron can lead to iron-deficiency anemia, which makes you feel tired and irritable. However, too much iron can be bad for you, too.

As a senior, you should get 8 mgs of iron a day from your food. If you are a vegetarian, you should try to consume about 14.4 mgs of iron a day.

Not all iron is created equal. Your body absorbs “heme iron,” which is found in beef, organ meats (kidney, liver, heart), lamb, pork, veal, chicken, turkey and fish, better than “non-heme iron,” which is found in grains, dried beans, nuts, seeds, vegetables, fruit and eggs. But both are important sources of iron.

If you are a vegetarian, you should make an extra effort to eat lots of iron-rich foods.

Eating foods high in vitamin C, such as oranges and orange juice, can help your body absorb non-heme iron.

Do not take an iron supplement in addition to your multivitamin/mineral unless your doctor tells you to. Instead, concentrate on healthy eating. Eating a variety of foods and taking a multivitamin/mineral will, in most cases, ensure you get all the iron you need.

### Magnesium

Your body needs magnesium to help maintain your muscles and nerves, keep your heart rhythms steady and control your blood pressure.

Good sources of magnesium include:

- spinach
- legumes, such as beans and peas
- nuts and seeds



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- whole grains
- meats
- fruits, and
- dairy products.

Senior men need 420 mgs of magnesium a day. Senior women require 320 mgs a day.

Some calcium supplements contain added magnesium because it was thought to help reduce the risk of hip fracture. However, this has not been proven by recent research. Healthy eating will make sure you get all the magnesium your body needs.

### What about other supplements – herbal and botanical supplements, fibre and meal replacements, for example?

#### Herbal and botanical supplements

Plants and other natural products have been used for thousands of years to maintain health and treat illness, and many are helpful. However, you should never assume that just because a health product is “natural” it is automatically “safe.”

Like conventional drugs, herbal medicines and other natural products may have potentially serious side effects or trigger allergic reactions. These supplements may also affect how your prescription drugs work.

Talk to your doctor before you take any supplements, including herbal or botanical supplements, Chinese, Ayurvedic or other traditional medicines. You should do this especially if you have a medical condition. Your doctor can tell you which supplements may be helpful, which may have negative side effects and how the supplements will interact with any medications you may be taking. You should also speak with your pharmacist before taking any supplements.

If you do decide to use an herbal or natural product, always look for the Natural Products Number or NPN. This number indicates that the product meets Health Canada manufacturing and safety standards.

### Fibre

Many seniors take fibre supplements to help with constipation. However, they should be used as a last resort only.

First, try changing what you eat. If that does not work, talk to your doctor about whether a laxative would be a good idea and which laxative is best for you. (See Chapter 6, What should I eat if I'm constipated? for more information.)

### Liquid nutritional supplements

Liquid nutritional supplements (often called meal replacement drinks) can be convenient, but they are better as a nutritious snack than as a meal.

If you think you might need a liquid nutritional supplement, talk to your doctor and then see a dietitian for a nutrition assessment. (Try Dial-A-Dietitian. See the back cover for contact information.)

### Before you have surgery

Tell your doctor about any vitamins, minerals, herbal medicines and anything else you are taking to supplement your diet.

Supplements can cause difficulties before, during and after surgery by causing your blood pressure or heart rate to go up or down. They may also lead to too much bleeding.

Your doctor may ask you to stop taking the supplements several weeks ahead of your surgery.

# Healthy Eating

## QUIZ # 3

### True or False?

1. All seniors need a multivitamin/mineral.  
TRUE. Look for a multivitamin/mineral intended for people over 50. There are some nutrients we might not get enough of from our food alone, especially vitamins D and B12.
2. All seniors need a calcium supplement.  
FALSE. If you are eating calcium-rich foods at every meal, you may not need to take a calcium supplement. But because many seniors do not get enough calcium or vitamin D (which helps our bodies absorb calcium), we recommend you talk to your doctor or a dietitian about your current eating habits and whether you should take a calcium supplement.
3. You can never take too much vitamin C.  
FALSE. You can usually get all the vitamin C you need by eating lots of vegetables and fruit and taking a multivitamin. If you decide to take more vitamin C, keep it to 2000 mgs or less a day. More than 2000 mgs is too much.
4. Herbal supplements must be safe because they're natural.  
NOT ALWAYS. If you are taking drugs for a medical condition, an herbal supplement may actually cause harm. Check with your doctor before taking any kind of supplement beyond a multivitamin/mineral and calcium with vitamin D.