

Vitamins and Minerals: From Food or Pills?

To be healthy it is best to get vitamins and minerals from food. Choose a variety of foods from the four food groups of Canada's Food Guide.

The four food groups:

- Vegetables and Fruit
- Grain Products
- Milk and Alternatives
- Meat and Alternatives

Foods from the four food groups contain nutrients like fibre, carbohydrates, protein and essential fats that are not found in vitamin and mineral pills. Food also contains phytochemicals, which are healthy plant substances. These nutrients often work better when eaten as food, instead of pills.

What are the jobs of the vitamins and minerals in my body?

The following table lists the jobs of the vitamins and minerals in your body. It also tells you what foods you can find vitamins and minerals in.

Vitamin	Job	Foods
Calcium	Builds bones, teeth, and healthy blood pressure. Helps nerves to talk to each other.	Milk products, fortified* soy beverage and juices, canned salmon with bones, soybeans, fortified* tofu, and sesame seeds
Folic Acid (Folate)	Breaks down proteins and then builds new cells. Decreases risk of neural tube defects in babies.	Fortified* grain products, beans, orange juice, dark green leafy vegetables, green peas, oranges, sunflower seeds and peanuts
Iron	Delivers oxygen (air) to the tissues in the body.	Fortified* grain products like cereal and pasta, red meats, nuts, beans, seeds, dried fruits and tofu
Thiamin, Riboflavin and Niacin	Helps to get energy from food and for overall health.	Fortified* and whole grain products, nuts, seeds, legumes, milk products, eggs, fish, poultry, pork and beef
Vitamin B₁₂	Helps your blood to be healthy. Helps your brain to work well.	Milk products, fish, poultry, meats, and fortified* foods
Vitamin C	Protects the body's cells from damage. Helps nerves to talk to each other.	Citrus fruits like oranges and grapefruit, broccoli, cauliflower, green pepper, strawberries, potatoes and fortified* juices
Vitamin D	Delivers calcium to the bones to make them strong.	Fortified* milk and soy or rice drinks, margarine, eggs, fortified* cereals and some fish like salmon or tuna
Vitamin E	Protects the body's cells from damage.	Vegetable oils, margarine, salad dressings and egg yolk

*Fortified foods are foods that have had vitamins and minerals added to them.

Do I need a vitamin and mineral pill?

Some people might need a vitamin and mineral pill if they are not able to get all the nutrition they need from food. The people listed below should talk to their doctor, dietitian or pharmacist about taking a vitamin and mineral pill.

- **Women who could get pregnant** should take a multivitamin and mineral pill that contains 400 µg of folic acid.
- **Pregnant and Lactating women.** Pregnant women have higher needs for vitamins and minerals like folic acid and iron.
- **People with low intake of milk and alternatives.** People who drink less than 2 cups (500 mL) of milk or fortified soy beverage every day need a vitamin D supplement. Also, people who eat very little milk or alternatives, like yogurt or cheese, may need a calcium and vitamin D supplement.
- **People who avoid whole food groups** because of food allergies or a low calorie diet. The kind of vitamin and mineral pill you should take depends on what foods you don't eat.
- **People who do not eat any animal foods** need to eat food fortified with vitamin B₁₂ or take a vitamin B₁₂ supplement. Vegans may also not eat enough iron, calcium, vitamin D, and zinc.
- **People over 50.** Getting older makes it harder for some people to take in enough vitamins and minerals from food. You should take a supplement of 400 IU (10 µg) vitamin D. You should also consider taking a supplement of vitamin B₁₂. You can take a multivitamin and mineral pill that contains both vitamins, or take these vitamins by themselves in separate pills.
- **People who smoke, or who drink too much alcohol.** If you do not eat enough foods from the four food groups you may need to take a multivitamin and mineral pill.

If you think you might need a multivitamin and mineral pill, talk to your doctor, registered dietitian or pharmacist.

How to choose a good multivitamin

- Ask a pharmacist which multivitamin and mineral pills are good choices. Store brands or generic pills are fine to use.
- Multivitamin and mineral pills have vitamins and minerals in amounts that are safe for you if you take only the dose stated on the label.
- Check the bottle to make sure the expiry date has not passed.
- Make sure that your multivitamin and mineral pill has a Drug Identification Number (DIN). This means that Health Canada has approved the product.
- Read labels to avoid ingredients you may be allergic to.

More is not better.

A higher amount of vitamins and minerals in pills is not better. Too many vitamins or minerals from supplements can be dangerous.

Large doses of vitamin A, vitamin D, iron, zinc, and selenium are poisonous. Vitamin B₆, vitamin C and fluoride can also be harmful in large amounts.

Keep all vitamin and mineral pills away from children.

Remember: Food is the best way to get the vitamins and minerals you need to be healthy!

For more information please call Capital Health LINK at 408-LINK (5465).