

## The Scoop on Supplements

If you go down the supplement aisle of any grocery store, you will see shelves nearly overflowing with vitamins, minerals, and herbals. There are also a lot of marketing claims stating that these products are necessary for health and that our food is not enough. So, what is the true scoop on nutritional supplements?



## What is a supplement?

A nutrition supplement is something that is not a traditional food item and is taken to add to (or to “supplement”) the diet.

Most nutrition supplements are in the form of a vitamin, mineral, herbs, plant compound (like caffeine), or probiotic.

Vitamins and minerals (micronutrients) are not produced in the body but are required for our body and its functions to work properly. They can be obtained from the diet, but some people take vitamin and mineral supplements.

Herbs and plant compounds are not required nutrients for bodily functions.

## Who might benefit from supplements?

- People who can't absorb all the nutrients they eat from food due to reasons such as:
  - Surgeries on their stomach or intestines (such as bariatric surgery)
  - Conditions that affect absorption (such as celiac disease, cystic fibrosis, or inflammatory bowel disease)
  - Changes in absorption during aging (can be seen with vitamins D and B12)
  - Medication side effects
- People with a nutrient deficiency that is confirmed by lab work.
  - Your healthcare provider should tell you what and how much of a vitamin/mineral you should take to fix a deficiency. A nutrient deficiency should not be self-treated.
- People who need help to fill nutrient gaps if their diet is low in a nutrient (i.e., vegan and vitamin B12) or if food intake is low for a temporary period of time.
- Certain conditions that require increased nutrient intake.
  - Pregnancy

## What are concerns about supplements?

Our bodies may use nutrients better when coming from whole foods. It is encouraged to get nutrients from food first when possible, and then consider supplements if needed. Supplements should “supplement” your diet. They should not replace food groups in your diet or be a reason to not try to



eat the most balanced diet that is possible.

Also, supplements are not regulated. This means that no governing body in the USA (such as the FDA) must approve a supplement for safety, effectiveness, or labeling before a product is sold. The FDA can monitor the safety and labeling of a product after it is on the market.

As a result, some supplements do not contain the ingredients they claim to contain, may have ingredients in different amounts than what is listed on the label, or may contain ingredients that are not on the label. In rare but extreme cases, this can be dangerous.



Choosing a supplement with a third-party verification (such as USP or NSF) can be helpful. A third-party verification is a voluntary program in which a manufacturer can choose to participate. The verification confirms that the ingredients on the label are truly in the product in the amount listed, that there are no unsafe levels of contaminants or undeclared ingredients in the product, and that the company is following safe and sanitary manufacturing practices. It does not verify that the product is effective.

Lastly, nutrition supplements can interact with some medications. You should check with your healthcare provider to ensure that any supplements you want to take do not affect how your medicines work in your body. Some health conditions make it unsafe to take certain supplements as well. Some supplements can also affect your lab work – for example, biotin supplements can affect the accuracy of thyroid lab levels. It's always a good idea to talk with your healthcare provider about any

supplements that you are taking (or want to take) so they can make the safest recommendations for your health care.

Some supplements can be toxic if taken in too large of a dose and/or for a prolonged time. Remember that “natural” does not equal safe.

### Summary:

Getting your nutrition from food first in a balanced diet is the best choice when possible. Do not use supplements to replace a balanced diet. Unless there are other health factors at play, a balanced diet can meet most nutrition needs.

But there are situations when nutrition supplements may be necessary. You should discuss this with your healthcare provider.

If you choose to take optional nutrition supplements, talk with your healthcare provider first to make sure they are safe for you. It is also good that they are aware you are taking supplements. This helps them make the safest recommendations as they care for you.



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### Would you like to work with a Registered Dietitian?

To schedule an appointment, please obtain a referral for **Medical Nutrition Therapy** and contact:  
**412-692-4497 (Oakland) OR 412-623-2421 (Shadyside)**

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