

# Dietary Supplements: Buyer Beware



“Caveat emptor” is the Latin phrase for “Let the buyer beware” and is especially true in the world of dietary supplements because they are very loosely regulated in the U.S. The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, does not require manufacturers to obtain approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration before placing supplements on the market. So what do we really know about our dietary supplements? Do supplements actually contain the ingredients listed on the label? Are we being misled by over the top advertisements? With an abundance of conflicting information and the risks with taking supplements in large doses, play it safe by answering these simple questions before deciding to supplement. Do I really need this supplement? Does it sound too good to be true? What are the potential negative side effects?

Get nutrients from food first  
The recently released the 2015-2020 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans identified “nutrients of concern.” These are the ones many Americans are not consuming in adequate amounts, which can lead to health problems. They include

calcium, potassium, fiber and vitamin D. In addition, for young children and woman of childbearing age, iron is also a nutrient of concern. But before rushing to the store to stock up on supplements, let’s explore foods that provide these nutrients and the benefits of consuming them naturally through a well-balanced diet.

**Calcium:** Foods rich in calcium include milk, yogurt, cheese, tofu, calcium-fortified foods, Chinese cabbage, kale and broccoli. Calcium plays a key role in bone health. However, buyers should be aware of over-supplementation. Excessive calcium can result in kidney stones, constipation and decreased absorption of other minerals.

**Potassium:** Fruits and vegetables are good sources of potassium, which helps control muscle contractions and blood pressure. A diet low in potassium can result in high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart failure. Too much potassium as a supplement can cause an irregular heartbeat so only take potassium supplements if recommended by a physician.

**Fiber:** Fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, dried peas and beans, nuts and grains. Fiber helps regulate blood sugar levels, lower blood cholesterol, prevent constipation and make you feel full longer. High-fiber foods deliver a variety of other nutrients in addition to fiber, while fiber supplements only provide fiber

**Vitamin D:** Vitamin D is produced in the skin when it’s exposed to sunlight and consumed in foods rich in vitamin D: fatty fish like salmon and tuna, eggs and vitamin D fortified foods such as milk, breakfast cereals and some juices. Vitamin D toxicity is only

seen when daily intake exceeds 10,000 IUs or seventeen times the recommended intake of 600 IUs/day.

When supplements are appropriate. For certain people dietary supplements are necessary and beneficial. These include pregnant women (prenatal vitamin, iron and folic acid), the elderly (B12, calcium and vitamin D), individuals with malabsorption problems or people with severe food allergies who must eliminate entire food groups. A registered dietitian nutritionist can evaluate your diet to see if are getting enough vitamins and minerals. To locate one in your area, go to [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) and click on “Find an Expert.” Contact your physician to determine if you have a nutrient deficiency, which requires a blood test.

**The Bottom Line**  
Rather than filling your medicine cabinet with supplements, fill your kitchen with a variety of nutritious foods like whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean meats and low fat dairy. Dietary supplements are intended to complement the nutrients you get from food, not replace healthy eating. More is definitely not always better. Remember, a bad diet with supplements is still a bad diet.



By Neva Cochran, MS, RDN, LD, Nutrition Communications Consultant and Jacob Meyers, THR Presbyterian Hospital Dietetic Intern