

Nutritional Supplements or Whole Foods, Which are Better?

There are pros and cons to both sides of the question; there really is no simple answer. It's wise to consult with a doctor or nutritionist, but first research and develop your own opinions. There is a wide spectrum of belief and advocacy, and your doctor or nutritionist's opinions may vary widely from your own.

Does your doctor know what is best for you? Sometimes. Doctors tend to underestimate the importance of nutrition in general. Most doctors didn't have much training in nutrition and cannot keep up on the latest research. Their practice is based on disease screening, not prevention, with an emphasis on drug therapies, not nutrition. Such doctors naturally think that nutritional supplements have little therapeutic value.

With that said, first we'll study the argument in favor of a whole foods diet. Nutrition affects our immune system, organ function, hormonal balance and cellular metabolism. The essential ingredients of health and well-being are a well-balanced diet, exercise, lots of fluid, and proper rest. A well-rounded daily diet includes 2-3 servings of milk, yogurt or cheese products; 2-3 servings of meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts group; 3-5 servings of vegetables; 2-4 servings of fruit; 6-11 servings of bread, cereal, rice, and pasta group. If you can put that together every day, you would think you don't need a vitamin!

It seems quite simple, but simplicity is just a facade; behind the scenes, the dance of life is quite complex. Which makes replacing nutritious food with a supplement very tricky.

Our bodies function in a delicate balance: an excess or lack of a nutrient can cause problems with the availability or function of another substance. Complicate that with the fact that researchers have not yet even identified all the active substances in food. Also, there are many beneficial substances that are difficult to package in a capsule, plus the supplement industry is largely unregulated. You don't know what you're getting when you buy a supplement.

Before you start taking anything other than a standard multivitamin-mineral supplement of 100%DV or less, you should check with your doctor, pharmacist or dietitian. The simple fact is that there are harmful effects associated with 30 different types of vitamins and minerals if taken by some people and if taken to extremes. The majority of vitamins and minerals are safe if the doses taken don't exceed the recommended dosage levels.

For example: too much vitamin A over a long period of time may cause liver problems or weaken bones in women, and high doses of vitamin B-3 (niacin) can make an existing liver problem a whole lot worse.

Some supplements may interfere with your other medications as well. For instance, vitamin E isn't recommended if you're taking blood-thinning medications because it can make controlling the problem much more difficult. This is an area where you should pay particular attention to your doctor's advice.

All of this evidence would lead you to believe that the best way to insure adequate nutrition is to eat right. Sounds simple, but it's not.

Most of us aren't eating enough of the right things, and our food quite literally isn't what it used to be. Our farming methods have changed for the worse. Crops are grown bigger and more colorful, nutritionally empty, and tasteless. We also import our food from vast distances, so it must be treated chemically to keep from spoiling.

In addition, there are other factors depleting nutrients from our bodies. Almost half of all American women are on some kind of diet at any given time. Many of these diets rob the body of vital nutrients. Chemical toxins in our environment burden our liver with the task of detoxifying, a process that uses up some of our stores of essential nutrients. We also have the stresses of everyday life: children, spouses, work, friends, parents, obligations. Stress has been shown to deplete nutrients and suppress immune function.

So between our improper eating habits, the deteriorating quality of the food available to us, and the stresses of modern life, we are not getting adequate nutrition from our food. Our bodies are miraculously good at healing injury and preventing illness if they are given adequate support. We just need to individually determine how best to provide for ourselves and in many cases, this means taking nutritional supplements.