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SUPPLEMENTS & HEALTH

WHAT TO
CONSIDER BEFORE TAKING SUPPLEMENTS

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There is so much information available nowadays regarding the benefits of different vitamin and herbal supplements and how we can use these natural medicines to improve our health. You can type any health condition into the search engine and pretty much act as your own healthcare practitioner and develop a treatment plan based on what you read. But can you always trust the information obtained? Can you be certain that your understanding of what is going on in your body is accurate? Here's some food for thought on the use of supplements.

1. WHAT DOES THE WORD 'SUPPLEMENT' ACTUALLY MEAN?

Supplement is something added to complete or strengthen a whole.

When we are looking at a nutrient deficiency picture then it makes sense to consider the short term use of a supplement to correct the problem. But why does the deficiency occur in the first place? Ultimately, there is something lacking within our diet and we are not supplying our body with enough of a certain nutrient. Other factors to consider are the possibility that an underlying health condition needs to be addressed or perhaps certain lifestyle factors such as alcohol consumption or smoking are contributing to nutrient depletion. Increased stress can also deplete our nutrient stores.

What's the long term solution? When we choose to nourish our bodies with good quality wholefoods it is possible to get all the nutrition needed to support good health. To do this we need to be equipped with the knowledge of how we need to eat to obtain the correct nutrition. Food is a complex source of vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals that work in synergy. This means that the bioavailability of nutrients is higher within a wholefood and our bodies can absorb more as a result.

Did you know that there is nearly 100 mg of vitamin C in one orange? Or that in one serving of kale you can obtain up to 150mg of calcium? You can support bone health, nerve and muscle function and your immunity by including these foods in your diet on a regular basis.

2. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH?

Everybody has different requirements for certain nutrients and some vitamins and minerals can be toxic when taken in large doses. Zinc is a mineral that is vital for excellent health however too much zinc can result in gastrointestinal upset and in excessive amounts, can lead to dizziness, immune suppression and changes in heartbeat. It is also possible to interfere in the balance of other nutrients when supplementing in isolation. Too much zinc may interfere with copper absorption and this will affect our iron metabolism. Iron and copper are important in red blood cell formation and a deficiency in these two minerals can lead to anaemia.



*Just because its 'natural'
doesn't mean it's always safe.*

3. OTHER ISSUES CONCERNING SAFETY

The use of some medications and herbal supplements together can either change the therapeutic effects on the body or lead to harmful outcomes. The herb Hypericum (St John's Wort) is a typical example. This herb can't be taken with certain anti-depressants and can reduce the efficiency of the oral contraceptive pill. It is important to know all of

the interactions if you take medication and are considering the use of self-medicating with supplements. Therefore when speaking with your health practitioner ensure that you let them know of any extra supplements that you may be taking. In summary, the individual herb or supplement may be very healthy but in combination with other medication may cause an adverse reaction.

4. THE LACK OF REGULATION WITHIN THE VITAMIN SUPPLEMENT INDUSTRY IS CONCERNING

In March this year the New York Attorney General revealed that the quality of supplements was highly variable (1). One



study found that 79% of supplements tested did not contain what the labels claimed. Lack of regulations mean that you can't always be certain of the ingredients listed or those contained but not listed. The source of raw materials obtained in production is also not always disclosed.

When considering the use of supplements, the ideal situation is under the guidance of a trained practitioner. Purchase only high quality products. After doing a thorough case history a practitioner is able to assess what would best support your body to balance and heal. In this situation various other factors are taken into consideration, such as dietary and lifestyle changes necessary to achieve health. There is a time and place for the short term use of supplements but nutrition through food should always be the priority when building the foundations of good health.

Further reading

Haas, Elson M 1999, *Staying Healthy with Nutrition. The complete guide to diet and nutritional medicine*, Celestial Arts Berkeley, California.

Emma Tippet completed her Bachelor of Health Science (Naturopathy) in 2004 at the Australian College of Natural Medicine. Growing up in rural Victoria within a household that embraced a natural approach to health and a love for wholefood nutrition, Emma has combined this foundation with a passion for continued learning to help others reach greater health potential. Emma practices in Surrey Hills, Victoria, Australia and can be contacted on 1300 214 425 or via her [website](#).

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