

Beyond Broccoli: Are Supplements Necessary?

The subject of dietary supplements was raised at a recent General Meeting. Dietician Rebecca Lwin clarifies some of the issues discussed.

A great controversy exists over whether we should take dietary supplements (vitamins, minerals, anti-oxidants, etc) or whether our diets should provide an adequate supply of our essential nutrients. As well, if we choose to supplement, which ones should we take and how much? The Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA)? Or more? I hope this article will help sort some of this out.

First of all, to assess whether we need to take vitamin and mineral supplements, we need to take a hard look at our dietary intake. To ensure an adequate intake of nutrients, we need to be eating from all the food groups (beer and cheese puffs don't count as their own group!) The food groups and minimum daily recommended servings include:

- Fruits: one serving = ½ cup (~110 ml or 125 gm) or one medium piece. 2 servings
- Vegetables: one serving = ½ cup cooked, 1 cup raw, or 2 cups raw leafy greens. 3 servings, including 3 servings of dark orange or yellow or deep green veggies per week.
- Breads/cereals/grains (preferably whole grain): one serving = 1 slice bread, ½ cup cooked grain or pasta. 6 servings
- Milk or calcium-fortified milk substitute: one serving = 1 cup (220 ml) milk, yogurt, or milk substitute (like soy milk). 2-3 servings
- Meat or meat substitute: one serving = 3 oz (~90 gm) meat, chicken, or

fish, 125 gm tofu, 2 whole eggs, 1 cup legumes. 2 servings

- Fat: no recommended serving but oils do contribute Vitamin E and some monounsaturated oils contribute omega-3 fatty acids to the diet.

If your diet meets these guidelines on a regular basis, then there is probably not a good reason for you to supplement. However, if you regularly exclude or limit one or more of these food groups for any reason- vegetarianism, dislike, or you simply do not eat enough vegetables (and are willing to admit it!) then you may benefit from taking a supplement.

However, if you do decide to take a supplement, you should take care in your choice. Many supplements are imbalanced, providing more than the RDA for one nutrient or another. Because several nutrients compete for the same absorption site in the small intestine (calcium, zinc, and iron, for example), if you take too much of one, you can create a deficiency in another. Unless you really know what you are doing, or have a doctor or nutritionist's guidance, my recommendation is to choose a multivitamin and mineral supplement with approximately 100% of the US (or Canadian or British) RDA for that nutrient. If you choose to take antioxidant vitamins (Vitamins A, C, E and selenium), choose a supplement with beta-carotene rather than pre-formed Vitamin A. Vitamins A and E are

fat-soluble vitamins, which are stored in your liver, not excreted through the kidneys. Any excess will build up to potentially toxic levels. In addition, many supplements have a tremendous excess of Vitamin C, which can lead, at best, to diarrhea, and at worst, to kidney stones. Try to not to exceed 1000 mg/day of Vitamin C. More is not necessarily better.

Some of us fall into special categories for which a calcium supplement is a wise idea. For those who are post-menopausal, the calcium recommendation is 1200-1500mg/day, or 4-5 servings of milk and dairy a day. As well, women with active osteoporosis

also need this high amount of calcium. This level of milk intake is very difficult to achieve and maintain; therefore, a supplement is recommended. Choose a supplement that also contains Vitamin D, as this enhances calcium absorption. Try to balance your supplement with your current intake of calcium, and space your supplements throughout the day; your body can only absorb a limited amount of calcium at a time. This is a general guideline for supplementation; it is a complicated choice and not one that should be made on a whim. If you need more information or help planning your diet or assessing your nutrient intake, please contact me.

Do you have any questions for our resident Dietician?

Just contact Rebecca Lwin to ask and if it is of interest to members she'll cover it in this monthly feature. thelwins@pltdtdsl.net