

Health Tip: Are Vitamin Supplements Worthwhile or Not?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- You may be wondering at this point whether to toss those vitamins into your mouth or into the trash. That's not surprising since several recent reports have called the value of vitamins into question, leaving people to wonder if it's time to ditch their supplements all together.

"People are so confused," says Elisabetta Politi, the nutrition director at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center. "But vitamins are like insurance, and there's no evidence that taking them is harmful."

"While vitamins are not meant to be magic bullets of prevention, most Americans have poor eating habits and don't get the daily recommended allowance of most vitamins and minerals," Politi adds. "That's why we continue to recommend a well-balanced multi-vitamin."

Multi-vitamins fortified with 800-1,000 international units (iu) of vitamin D are even better. "We know about 50 percent of Americans don't get enough vitamin D," says Politi. That's a problem because low levels of this particular vitamin have been linked to osteoporosis, fibromyalgia, colon cancer, and gingivitis, as well as immune system disorders like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and type 1 diabetes.

However, vitamins cost money, and in this economy, with everyone looking to save their pennies, you can easily cut the expense and the daily pill popping. All you have to do is maintain a healthy diet. Here's how:

- Eat at least five servings of vegetables and fruits every day.
- Frozen vegetables are fine but fresh are even better (and possibly cheaper) when locally produced. Visit a local farmer's market, join a local co-op or better yet, start a community garden in your area to get the most bang for your buck.
- Sweet vegetables like corn, carrots, yams and fruits reduce your cravings for sweets, while dark green leafy vegetables like spinach, kale and collard greens are packed with minerals like iron, potassium, zinc and calcium. Bright, deep-colored fruits contain vitamins, minerals and antioxidants too. "All of these are really important if you want to get your vitamins and minerals from foods rather than a pill," she says.
- Aim for three servings a day of low-fat dairy products, which are the best sources of calcium. One serving equals one cup of milk, one cup of yogurt or about an ounce of low-fat cheese.
- Make every attempt to balance your caloric intake with your caloric expenditure. It's the only way you'll be able to either maintain your current weight or even lose some of the extra pounds you've been holding on to.

"The bottom line is if you eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, lean protein and whole grains, your diet will provide you with the right mix of carbohydrate, fiber and healthy fats," she says.

Even with the best intentions, however, you may still need a multi-vitamin if you're:

- a poor or picky eater
- a vegetarian, especially vegan who avoid animal products like milk, cheese and eggs
- pregnant, trying to get pregnant or breast-feeding woman
- following a restricted calorie diet
- allergic to a particular food or have a medical condition that affects how your body absorbs or uses food, or you've undergone surgery on

your digest tract.

Politi says it's important to check your multi-vitamin's nutritional value, making sure it's between 50-200 percent for each ingredient. "If, for example, it has 100 percent of vitamin A, then you know that it contains the recommended daily amount," she says. Also, take your supplement with your main meal of the day to enhance absorption. And, be sure to look at the expiration date. "Just like medicines, vitamin supplements expire and some of their biological properties can be lost or diminished."

Provided by Duke University Health System

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