

HEALTH SUPPLEMENTS

Vitamins and minerals are nutrients your body needs in small amounts to work properly and stay healthy. Most people don't need to take vitamin supplements and are able to get all the vitamins and minerals they need by eating a healthy, balanced diet although some few people may need to take extra supplements.

Vitamins and minerals are essential nutrients, such as iron, calcium and vitamin C. Many people choose to take supplements, but taking too much or taking them for too long could be harmful.

Dietary or nutritional supplements include any consumed products that aim to supplement the diet and provide additional nutrients that may be missing from it, or aren't There is a huge range of supplements available being consumed in sufficient quantities. Today's supplements contain not just vitamins and minerals, but herbs, amino acids, enzymes, fibre and fatty acids. They also come in a variety of forms, including traditional tablets, capsules, powders, drinks and supplement bars. They can be found in supermarkets, pharmacies, health food shops and, of course, on the internet. Many supplements are actually classified as foods rather than medicines and so don't have to go through the usual checks and regulations a medicine would go through for safety and efficacy (how well it works) before being put on the market. They are covered by the Food Safety Act and should not be harmful to health. Other supplements are classified and regulated as medicines because of their reported effects and methods of use.

People take supplements for all kinds of reasons, usually relating to their health. They hope these will boost vitality, limit the signs of ageing, extend life, cut the risk of chronic disease such as cancer and treat specific ailments such as arthritis.

What's the best way to get enough vitamins?

The best way for most of us to get enough vitamins is to eat a varied and balanced diet. This includes plenty of fruit and vegetables; plenty of starchy foods, such as bread, rice, potatoes, and pasta; some milk and dairy foods; some meat, fish, eggs, and beans and other non-dairy sources of protein. Foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar should be kept to a minimum. Vitamin D is an exception here. A small amount is obtained through diet but most of this vitamin is made under the skin when it is exposed to sunlight.

The perceived benefits of many popular products have not been confirmed through robust research. In some cases these supplements may even be harmful. Overall, it is clear that we may be placing our hope in products that still require far more testing. Of course, that's not to say that there aren't any supplements that work, or that all are harmful. There are some products that have been found to have clear benefits and many have been found to be generally safe for use. The key point is that we can't be certain that they are necessarily effective or safe until they have been put through robust testing.

More information about health supplements can be found at www.nhs.uk