

starter kit

It's Supplementary,
My Dear Watson

By Jack Challem



How to start a
sensible
supplement
program

Maybe you've heard that a certain dietary supplement can ease your aches and pains, or—my gosh—help you live to be 120 years old. Or you recently stepped into a health or natural food store and felt completely overwhelmed by the wall of supplements.

You want to do something good for your body, but where should you start? And how do you avoid getting confused? Follow these eight steps for starting and managing a sensible supplement program—one that will help you stay focused and feel great.

1. Decide on Your Objectives

Approach supplementing as you would other important decisions in life: Have a reason for what you do. If you don't have a clear objective for taking supplements, maybe you should hold off for a while (and keep reading).

Most people typically start supplementing for one of four reasons: One, they want a supplement that provides nutritional insurance against poor eating habits. Two, they want to reduce their long-term risk of disease and disability.

Three, they'd like to reduce their risk of a specific disease that runs in their family. Four, they want to reduce symptoms of a health problem they already are dealing with, such as diabetes, heart disease, forgetfulness, or allergies.

Whatever your reason, supplementing is a commitment. You should take your supplements consistently as part of a broader program (including good eating habits and regular physical activity) to prevent or reverse health problems.



2. Start with a Multivitamin

Vitamin deficiencies are common in the United States. Before you take any other supplement, start with a moderately high-potency multivitamin. There are a lot of different types on the market. High-potency supplements provide more value for your money, and some are formulated for men's health, women's health, diabetes, or pregnancy. Tip: If the multi provides at least 20 mg of vitamin B1, odds are that the other B vitamins will generally fall in line in terms of potency. Multivitamins should also include vitamins C, D, and E as well as some minerals, such as calcium, magnesium, and zinc.

TIP: Beware of bargain-brand supplements—they can contain harmful additives, artificial colors, preservatives, and even pesticides. Choose only high-quality supplements from reputable companies.

4. Your Body Will Change— So Will Your Supplement Needs

Just because you've found the right supplement regimen to support your health today does not mean the same program will be ideal in 10 years. Odds are, in 10 years, you'll need more of some nutrients to offset age-related slowing in biochemical processes. And you may have to modify your supplements (by type or dosage) if you're under more stress or change your exercise habits. To be really scientific about determining which nutrients you may need in high dosages, find a nutritionally oriented physician who can measure your blood levels of vitamins, minerals, and vitamin-like nutrients.

5. Consider Adding One or Two Single Supplements

There are plenty of beneficial nutrients not technically classified as vitamins or minerals. Got sore knees? More than 40 human studies have found that glucosamine reduces pain associated with osteoarthritis, and a couple of studies actually found that supplements helped regenerate knee cartilage.

Some of the other worthwhile stand-alone supplements include coenzyme Q10 (to strengthen the heart), lutein (to improve visual acuity), lycopene (to prevent and reverse prostate problems), and Pycnogenol (to help reduce inflammation). Many of these vitamin-like supplements have very specific health benefits.

3. Add a Multimineral

Most minerals are bulkier than vitamins, and because of this, most supplements claiming to be a "multivitamin/multimineral" tend to scrimp on the minerals—there are manufacturing limits governing the size of supplements, as well as limits to what people can swallow.

To avoid shortchanging yourself, consider taking a separate multimineral supplement. However, don't judge the quality of a multimineral by calcium alone. The supplement should also contain chromium, magnesium, potassium, selenium, zinc, and other important minerals.

Make it a habit!

Supplements don't have benefits if you don't take them, so incorporate them into your daily routine. Sort your vitamins into a week's worth of small (1- x 2-inch) resealable plastic bags, which you can get at a jeweler, hobby, or bead shop. These tiny bags make it easy to carry your vitamins in a pocket or purse. You can also order bags from thepillbag.com.

6. Follow the 30-Day Rule

If you start taking a supplement to help with a specific health concern, apply the 30-day rule: If it doesn't seem to help within 30 days, stop taking it. If the symptoms then suddenly get worse, the supplement probably was helping, but the improvement was slow and hard to notice.

7. Watch for Overlapping Vitamins and Minerals

If you're taking a multivitamin and want to add another formula, such as one to improve blood sugar, compare the ingredients. You may end up getting more of some vitamins or minerals than you need (though the excess is rarely harmful). For example, one formula may have 400 IU of vitamin E, and the second may have 300 IU. Do you really need 700 IU daily?



Resume taking the supplement for another 30 days to find out. In general, the 30-day rule does not apply to multivitamins taken as dietary insurance. However, many people report "side benefits" after starting multivitamin supplements, such as when nuisance conditions disappear.

TIP: Be mindful of the expiration date on all vitamins and supplements, and discard them if you notice any change in odor or appearance. Storing them in a cool, dry, dark place will prolong their effectiveness.

8. Take Your Supplements at the Right Times

Most supplements should be taken with food. After all, supplements are nutrients and they usually work best with other nutrients. Take most supplements with breakfast, or split them between breakfast and lunch. Some exceptions: You can take vitamin C any time. Take amino acid supplements about 30 minutes before meals or about two hours after meals. Try not to take vitamin B6 in the evening—it can overstimulate dream activity in some people. ✦



What's in that Multivitamin ... and Why?

Although ingredients in multivitamin and multimineral supplements vary slightly, they tend to contain the same basic nutrients.

■ VITAMINS

Vitamin A (or beta-carotene): for normal and night vision.

Vitamin B1: for carbohydrate metabolism and energy production.

Vitamin B2: for energy production; may also help with migraines.

Vitamin B3: for energy production; high doses may be helpful in treating mental illness and lowering cholesterol.

Vitamin B6: for making serotonin and other neurotransmitters.

Vitamin B12: for protecting genes against damage.

Vitamin C: for immunity; high doses may

reduce fatigue and improve mood.

Vitamin D: for utilizing calcium; important for immunity and reducing cancer risk.

Vitamin E: for reducing risk of coronary heart disease and some neurological disorders.

Vitamin K: for normal blood coagulation, bone formation, and glucose tolerance. (Find a multiple without this if you take warfarin.)

Folic Acid: for reducing risk of heart disease, stroke, and cancer.

Pantothenic Acid: for making adrenal hormones, which help us deal with stress.

Biotin: for regulating blood sugar levels.

Choline: for normal brain development and function.

Inositol: for mental health; high doses may help relieve depression and anxiety.

■ MINERALS

Calcium: for making bone; best used in con-

junction with magnesium and vitamins D and K.

Chromium: for normal regulation of insulin and blood sugar.

Copper: for normal immunity and blood-vessel repair.

Iodine: for making thyroid hormones, which regulate metabolism.

Manganese: for normal blood sugar and connective tissue health.

Magnesium: for bone and heart rhythm regulation.

Phosphorus: for normal bone formation—but deficiencies are rare.

Potassium: for maintaining normal electrolyte balance; may offset large amounts of dietary sodium.

Selenium: for making some of the body's own antioxidants; can reduce cancer risk.

Zinc: for immunity; healthy skin and eyes.