

a healthy conversation

Are you getting all of the nutrients you need?

Multivitamins can round-out dietary needs and prevent health problems

From Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield

Vitamins are the essential nutrients that your body needs to thrive and function. By eating a well-balanced diet, rich in fruits and vegetables, you'll take in most of the vitamins you need. But, sometimes, we fall short. Certain illnesses and conditions can also keep us from getting the proper levels of nutrients. So, how do you know if a multivitamin supplement is right for you?

When to use a multivitamin — and how to choose one

While a balanced, nutrient-rich diet is the best way to get vitamins and minerals, people with dietary restrictions or food allergies might fill in the gaps with a multivitamin. Because the recommended daily intake for nutrients varies by age, gender, and health condition, talk to your doctor about what you should look for in a vitamin supplement.

Those who should consider using a multivitamin:

- **Women who are pregnant or trying to get pregnant.** Consume adequate amounts of folic acid (found in forti-

fied breads, cereals, pastas and other grains, and in supplement form) to prevent spina bifida and other birth defects.

- **Premenopausal women, vegetarians and vegans.** Monitor iron intake (red meat, beans, lentils and spinach contain iron), as many people fall short of this nutrient.
- **Vegans and adults over the age of 50.** You might be deficient in vitamin B-12. That nutrient comes from dairy, eggs, seafood and poultry, which vegans avoid, and some older adults don't easily absorb the vitamin from food.
- **Older adults and people not exposed to enough sunlight.** You may need supplemental vitamin D. The body's ability to get the vitamin from the sun's rays decreases with age.
- **Individuals who have conditions affecting how the body digest food** (such as food allergies, gastrointestinal diseases or lactose intolerance). Those who have

had gastric bypass surgery for weight loss, may need to enhance their diets with supplements.

Other considerations

When considering multivitamins, watch out for potential interactions with medications and lifestyle habits. Too much iron, for instance, builds up in the body and can damage organs and tissue. Extra folic acid might boost cancer risk. Supplements containing vitamin K can lower the effectiveness of blood-thinning medications like Warfarin (including Coumadin and other brand names). Research also links multivitamins containing large amounts of beta-carotene and vitamin A to increased lung cancer risk among smokers and former smokers.

To avoid taking in too much of certain nutrients, consider multivitamin formulas created for specific ages and genders. Multivitamins for older adults tend to include extra vitamin D and calcium, for example, while men's formulas tend to contain lower levels of iron.

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