

Supplement survey

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How to decide what to keep when you update your vitamin cabinet

By Victoria Dolby Toews, MPH



Do you have so many bottles spilling out of your vitamin cabinet that you can't keep track of what's really essential? Maybe it's time to rethink your daily pill routine, and zero in on the right mix for your health needs.

First, start with a daily multivitamin. "A good multivitamin is basic 'health insurance' for everyone," says Douglas Husbands, DC, CCN, a chiropractor and nutritionist in San Carlos, California. "In fact, according to many research articles, 80 percent of Americans are deficient in one or more essential nutrients." (For details on picking the right daily multi, check out "Six Tips for Choosing and Using Multivitamins," below.)

Next, decide what else to take by pinpointing where your body needs support. Whether you have seasonal allergies, digestive disturbances, or joint pain, specific supplements and herbs can help. The supplements in these pages address particular common concerns. And, as always, before taking any new pills or mixing medications, talk to your health care practitioner.

Concern: seasonal allergies

Supplement solution: Vitamin C (1-2 grams daily) and quercetin (500-1,000 mg daily)

How they work: "Any nutrient that aids immune-system function is great for allergies," says Georgianna Donadio, DC, PhD, founder and director of the National Institute of Whole Health. Vitamin C eases hay fever symptoms, such as itchy eyes, runny nose, and sneezing, by blocking the release of histamine (*Alternative Medicine Review*, 2000, vol. 5, no. 5). You'll get the most out of vitamin C if you start taking it several weeks before allergy season hits and combine it with quercetin, another natural antihistamine.

Concern: weight control

Supplement solution: B vitamins (B50 complex daily), cinnamon (2-4 grams daily), or pyruvate (6 grams daily)

How they work: B-complex vitamins play important roles in metabolism, digestion, liver function, and proper thyroid function; problems in any of these areas can thwart weight loss efforts. Cinnamon helps maintain normal blood sugar, promotes normal blood fats, and enhances cell energy. "Anything that helps regulate and control insulin and hormone function is going to help with weight loss," says Donadio.

Pyruvate increases the body's use of fat as an energy source and boosts metabolic rates (*Journal of the American Pharmaceutical Association*, 2004, vol. 44, no. 1). A six-week study of 26 overweight individuals who combined either 6 grams of pyruvate supplement or a placebo with a three-times-per-week exercise program found that the pyruvate group lost more weight and fat mass (*Nutrition*, 1999, vol. 15, no. 5). More is not necessarily better with this supplement; large amounts (10 grams per day and up) can trigger stomach upset, bloating, gas, and diarrhea in some people.

Concern: stress

Supplement solution: B vitamins (B50 complex daily) or rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*; 200-600 mg daily)

How they work: "Without a doubt, the B complex is the number-one nutrient for stress relief," says Donadio. B vitamins aid the adrenal glands, which help you adapt to stressful situations and recover from them quickly, according to Donadio.

The herb rhodiola also helps the body handle physical or mental stress (*Alternative Medicine Review*, 2002, vol. 7, no. 5; *Phytotherapy*, 2003, vol. 10, nos. 2-3). For ongoing stress, take a standardized extract of rhodiola for several months. For an acute situation, such as a final exam or athletic event, take a one-time dose of 600 mg.

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Sidebar:

1] Spread your dose throughout the day. Multis designed to be taken in several smaller doses are better absorbed by the body, and they allow you to adjust the amounts you take based on each day's diet. Once-a-day multis make better sense for people who have trouble remembering or are too busy to take several pills each day.

[2] Choose natural nutrients. Natural forms of nutrients generally are more easily absorbed. Look to the label for natural vitamin E (d-alpha-tocopherol or RRR-alpha-tocopherol), natural selenium (selenium-rich yeast or L-selenomethionine), and natural chromium (chromium-rich yeast).

[3] Look for active forms of B's. To improve absorption, buy multis with the riboflavin-5-phosphate form of vitamin B2, the pyridoxal-5-phosphate form of B6, and the methylcobalamin and adenosylcobalamin forms of B12.

[4] Find adequate calcium and magnesium levels. A good multivitamin should have almost equal amounts of calcium citrate and magnesium citrate (400 to 800 mg each). If your multivitamin does not have adequate doses of these nutrients, consider taking an additional calcium-magnesium supplement. Beware that some people develop diarrhea when taking more than 300 to 400 mg of magnesium. The best way to get calcium is through food sources.

[5] Take your multi with a meal. The body better assimilates the nutrients when food and digestive enzymes are also present—and nausea is less likely.

[6] Store your supplements in a cool, dark place. Heat and light can degrade some of the nutrients in multivitamins.

Sources: Douglas Husbands, DC, CCN; Georgianna Donadio, DC, PhD.