

Do You Need Vitamins? (And If So, Which Ones?)

*Should you take a multi? Calcium? D? B12? K?
(Yes, that exists.) Nine out of 10 women are undernourished,
so these are answers you need. BY KAREN ASP*



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WE ALL HAVE a basic idea of which foods are good for us and which aren't—so why is it, then, that more than 90 percent of women ages 19 to 30 fail to meet guidelines for eight food groups, including fruits, veggies, whole grains and milk? That's the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control—and let's face facts: It paints a grim picture about our health.

"When young women take stock of what they eat, even 'healthy' eaters are surprised to learn they get many calories from sugary, fatty foods, which crowd out nutritious ones," says Elisa Zied, R.D., author of *Nutrition at Your Fingertips*. How do you know how you're doing—and which, if any, vitamins should you be taking to fill the gaps?

First, take our quiz. Ask yourself, every day, do I generally average:

- Five to six ounces of grains, three of which are whole? (One ounce is a slice of whole wheat bread or a half cup of oatmeal.)
 - Four to five servings of veggies? (One serving is half of a large sweet potato, six baby carrots or a cup of leafy greens.)
 - Three to four servings of fruit? (One serving is a small banana or 16 grapes.)
 - Three cups of dairy? (One is a cup of milk or yogurt, or one-and-a-half ounces of cheese.)
 - Five to five-and-a-half ounces of protein? (Think meat, beans, eggs, fish, nuts and seeds.)
 - One treat in the 150- to 250-calorie range? (That's a small cookie or a five-ounce glass of wine.)
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**BEFORE YOU
POP A PILL**
Check where your diet is falling short, and talk to your doctor.

HAIR: GAVIN HARWIN FOR CUTLER SALON AT ART DEPARTMENT; MAKEUP: MARINA ANDERSSON FOR KBAMER-KRAMER

If you checked all six boxes, congrats! You're getting most of the nutrients you need. Still, many experts recommend two supplements for most young women. First, vitamin D. Studies have linked low D levels to weight gain, depression, heart disease and frequent colds, and "it's one of the trickiest vitamins to get through food alone," says Kate Geagan, R.D., author of *Go Green, Get Lean*. Most women need 600 IU of D a day, but ask your doc to check your levels to know what you need. And second, unless you routinely eat fish like salmon, sardines and mackerel two to three times a week, consider a fish oil supplement with 1,000 mg of omega-3 fatty acids and at least 300 mg of DHA. Fish oil has been linked to fighting heart disease, depression and weight gain.

If you answered no to any of these, start by improving your diet. Then consider a multivitamin; dietitians and doctors debate the benefits, but five of the seven experts we spoke to recommend one. "I take a multi every day," Zied says. "It can't replace a balanced diet, but it can fill gaps." Just make sure the dose of most nutrients in your multi is at or below 100 percent of recommended amounts and check the label that it's third-party certified—this is proof you're getting what it says you're getting, says Geagan. Whether you need other vitamins on top of the multi depends on your diet. Your Rx starts here:

If you're not eating enough grains...

There's no way around it: You need more, yep, whole grains, which can help you get enough B vitamins like folate, as well as fiber, which can help you stay at a healthy weight. Researchers at Tufts University in Boston found that people who ate the most whole grains had far less abdominal fat than those who had refined ones. **Your prescription:** the multi, and a diet richer in whole-grain (versus white) breads, cereals, pastas and brown rice.

If you're not eating enough veggies...

You're not alone: Only 27 percent of adults eat enough—a shame since veggies help reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and multiple cancers. "We absorb nutrients from food much better than from supplements," says Molly Morgan, R.D., author of *The Skinny Rules*. **Your prescription:** the multi, and more veggies (fill half your plate with them at dinner).

If you're not eating enough fruits...

You may need to cut back on sweets. Only 33 percent of us get enough fruit, and that's because sweets like sodas and candy often crowd out the natural stuff in a woman's diet, says Zied. Grab fruit instead and you'll eat less bad stuff *and* get antioxidants that may boost immunity and fight disease. "A handful of berries can quell a sweet craving without the calorie damage of candy," Zied says. **Your prescription:** the multi, and a diet that replaces most sweets with fruit.

If you're not eating enough dairy...

You may need a calcium supplement. "So many young women are lacking in calcium," says Keri Gans, R.D., author of *The Small Change Diet*. Your body absorbs it better from food than a pill, but hitting 1,000 mg a day ain't easy—a cup of milk (300 mg) plus a yogurt (300 mg) won't get you there. Salmon and dark leafy greens

add to your tally, but you may still need a boost. **Your prescription:** If your multi has at least 250 mg and your diet covers the rest, you're set. Otherwise, get a supplement.

If you're not eating enough protein...

You may need B12 and omega-3s. B12 is hot right now: Celebs pop it to boost energy, and gyms offer it in smoothies. As for us regular people? "I've found more women who were deficient than I would have thought," says Linda Assatourians, M.D., assistant clinical professor of medicine at the George Washington University. And if you're not regularly eating salmon, eggs and meat, ask your doctor to test your levels. **Your prescription:** the multi and a B12 supplement if your doctor finds you lacking.

If you're not getting a treat now and then...

Please, have dessert! "A slice of cake can fit into a healthy diet," Zied says. "If you feel deprived, you're more likely to overeat." ■

SUPPLEMENTS.
A CURE?
No, silly, not
this many!



"I Solved It With Vitamins!"

Anyone out there still skeptical that vitamins can make you healthier? These young women beg to differ:

"As a teen, I was always tired, even though I was eating healthy and getting enough sleep. In college, my doctor diagnosed me with anemia. Iron, vitamin C and vitamin D supplements have made all the difference. I'm even running my first 5K in August!"
—Brittany Hart, 22, North Salt Lake, Utah

"I've suffered from extreme knee pain and seasonal depression for years. I finally went to the doctor, who diagnosed me with low vitamin D and put me on a high dose of it. Ever since then, my knee pain has almost disappeared, and my mood is markedly better."
—Kimberly Wise, 32, Hyattsville, Md.

"Last summer I went to a neurologist because I was having a tingling in my hands and feet. He had me start taking B12 and D. I became diligent about taking my vitamins, and after a few weeks, the tingling for the most part disappeared."
—Ranya Barrett, 30, Jersey City

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