

Monitoring the population's food and supplement intakes

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The ARS Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center in 2011 released data tables that summarize not only nutrients gained from foods and beverages consumed—but for the first time also from supplements consumed. Credit: Peggy Greb.

Collecting data on what the U.S. population actually consumes is a key nutrition monitoring step. Nutritionists then translate "foods eaten" into "nutrients consumed." This snapshot of the population's food-nutrient intakes provides an overview of the nation's nutritional health status and health outcomes. Now, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) researchers are providing data on dietary supplement intakes also collected during the annual national government survey.

In 2011, nutritionists at the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center (BHNRC) in Beltsville, Md., released new data tables that summarize "Total Nutrient Intakes" in the United States. Using data on the use of dietary supplements collected in the national survey, these tables report the nutrients that survey participants consumed from both foods and supplements, and are released by the BHNRC Food Surveys Research Group, headed by nutritionist Alanna Moshfegh. ARS is USDA's chief scientific research agency.

The [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) and healthcare professionals recommend people get their nutrients from foods, because there are [natural compounds](#) in foods that don't translate into tablets. But single- and multi-vitamin supplements can make up for some nutritional shortfalls. Dietary supplements are widely used and contribute to nutrient intakes, so it's important to accurately monitor people's nutrient intakes from both supplements and foods.

For example, among people age 20 and older, 48 percent of women and 38 percent of men report using supplements, according to the ARS national "[What We Eat in America](#)" survey findings. Among the many findings, the new "Total [Nutrient Intake](#)" tables confirm what has long been suspected: People who take dietary supplements in general have higher nutrient intakes from the foods they choose than do those who don't take supplements.

For the ARS national program for human nutrition monitoring, BHNRC researchers first develop analytical techniques for validating what's in the foods and [dietary supplements](#) that people consume. These analytical methods ensure authoritative nutrient values are in the ARS national food-composition databases, which undergird accurate dietary survey collections and results.

More information: [Read more](#) about the ARS national program for human nutrition monitoring in a three-part series featured in the March 2012 issue of *Agricultural Research* magazine.

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