

# Do you need to take supplements if you eat a healthy diet?

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Vitamin supplements are a big business, with Americans spending roughly \$45 billion out of more than \$177 billion worldwide on pills, gummies and powders meant to boost health.

About 59 million Americans regularly use some type of vitamin or supplement, spending an average \$510 each year.

But most folks are wasting that money, experts say.

A balanced daily diet provides all the nutrients a person typically needs to maintain their health, said [Dr. Matthew Silvis](#), vice chair of clinical operations for Penn State Health Family and Community Medicine.

"If you have a well-balanced diet and you're able to eat nutritious foods — fruits, vegetables, etc. — you don't need a multivitamin or a supplement," Silvis said in a news release.

"The broad answer is most people don't need them, despite the multibillion-dollar industry that the vitamin industry is," he continued. "But there are populations of individuals who do need to consider a multivitamin or a supplement. And that is individualized."

Examples of people who do need specific supplements include:

- Pregnant women who need [folic acid](#) to prevent birth defects.
- Seniors with osteoporosis who can benefit from calcium and Vitamin D supplements.
- Vegans or people with Celiac disease who need a multivitamin to supplement the nutrients they aren't absorbing from their diet.

High-intensity athletes who regularly participate in draining workouts and fierce competition also might be justified in turning to some supplements, said Silvis, who also serves as medical director of primary care sports medicine for Penn State Health.

"Professional hockey players burn an incredible amount of fuel on a day-to-day-to-week basis," he said. "We look at their [protein intake](#) and they can't possibly eat enough chicken and steak and protein to make up for those losses and we can't have them losing muscle mass. They often

supplement with protein shakes, because that is a quick, easy way for them to maintain their protein intake."

However, that doesn't include average folks participating in athletics as a pastime, Silvis noted.

"Do all athletes need to take protein shakes? Absolutely not," he said. "Your child on a T-ball team does not need a protein shake."

Silvis said it's best to talk with a doctor about whether you need a vitamin or supplement before hitting your local nutrition center, drug store or supermarket.

If your body doesn't need a particular nutrient, more likely than not the excess will be flushed out.

Essentially, the money spent on most unnecessary supplements goes straight down the toilet.

"If you have a well-balanced diet, well, you just literally urinate out the vitamins and minerals that you are taking with the multivitamin," Silvis said. "You can only absorb so much, and once you are past that limit, you just excrete the vitamin.

"So, the mentality that, 'if something is good, more must be better,' is not true," he added.

For example, there's no evidence that taking loads of Vitamin C can ward off colds, and little to suggest it helps speed recuperation, Silvis said.

"There's a lot of debate about whether or not Vitamin C actually changes how long you are going to have your illness," Silvis said. "But as with

other vitamins, if you have a healthy, well-balanced diet with fruits and vegetables, you'll meet your dietary needs day to day."

Worse, people can actually cause a health problem for themselves if they take too much of certain vitamins, he said.

For example, excess Vitamin A can lead to a toxic condition called hypervitaminosis, which can cause vision and skin changes, bone pain and even liver damage.

If a person is intent on taking supplements, they should make sure what they are ingesting is as safe as possible, Silvis said.

When shopping for vitamins, consumers should look for the United States Pharmacopeia verified mark on the product, to ensure that what is on the label is actually in the product, Silvis said.

Folks buying sports performance enhancers should look for products approved by the NSF Certified for Sport, a nonprofit that requires strict standards for supplements, Silvis said.

"Those are the checks and balances that you can provide patients. Because there are walls and walls and rows and rows of options when you go to the store," Silvis said. "So, if you don't arm the person with the knowledge of what to look for, both in terms of the content of the vitamin or supplement and to make sure that it's going to be safe for the patient, then I don't think I've done my job."

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