

# Vitamins and Minerals: From Pills or Food?

Most people can meet their vitamin and mineral needs by following Canada's Food Guide. Healthy foods have nutrients that are not found in vitamin and mineral pills: fibre, carbohydrates, protein, essential fats, and phytochemicals (healthy plant substances). These nutrients often work better when eaten as food instead of pills.

## What do vitamins and minerals do in our bodies?

The table below lists the jobs of the vitamins and minerals in our bodies. It also lists some foods that are good sources of the vitamins and minerals.

Vitamin or Mineral	Job	Foods
<b>Calcium</b>	Builds bones and teeth. Helps keep blood pressure healthy. Helps nerves to send signals to each other.	Milk and milk products, fortified* soy beverages and juices, canned salmon with bones, soybeans, fortified* tofu, sesame seeds
<b>Folic Acid (Folate)</b>	Breaks down proteins and then builds new cells. Decreases risk of neural tube defects in babies.	Oranges, orange juice, dark green leafy vegetables, green peas, fortified* grain products, beans, sunflower seeds, peanuts
<b>Iron</b>	Delivers oxygen (air) to the tissues in the body.	Dried fruit; fortified* grain products like cereal and pasta, all meat, fish, and poultry, nuts, legumes (beans, peas, lentils), seeds, tofu
<b>Magnesium</b>	Builds bones and teeth. Helps the muscles, nerves and the immune system work well.	Spinach, Swiss chard and other greens, bran (wheat, oat), whole grain foods, milk products, seeds, nuts, legumes (beans, peas, lentils)
<b>Phosphorous</b>	Builds bones and teeth. Helps the body make energy.	Whole grain products, milk products, meat, nuts, seeds
<b>Potassium</b>	Builds bones. Helps keep a healthy blood pressure.	Most vegetables and fruits, potatoes, whole grains, milk products, nuts, legumes (beans, peas, lentils)
<b>Zinc</b>	Helps in healing and is needed for a healthy immune system.	Grain products (breads, cereals, pasta), milk products, meat, nuts, seeds
<b>Thiamin, Riboflavin, and Niacin</b>	Help your cells to get energy from food. Are important for overall health.	Fortified* and whole grain products, milk products, nuts, seeds, legumes (beans, peas, lentils), eggs, fish, poultry, pork, and beef
<b>Vitamin B<sub>12</sub></b>	Helps your blood to be healthy. Helps your brain to work well.	Milk products, fish, poultry, meat, eggs, fortified* foods
<b>Vitamin C</b>	Protects your body's cells from damage. Helps nerves to send signals to each other.	Citrus fruits like oranges and grapefruit, broccoli, cauliflower, green pepper, most berries, potatoes, fortified* juices
<b>Vitamin D</b>	Sends calcium to the bones to make them strong.	Fortified* cereals; fortified* milk, soy, and rice drinks, eggs, some fish like salmon or tuna, margarine
<b>Vitamin E</b>	Protects your body's cells from damage.	Vegetable oils, margarine, salad dressings, egg yolk
<b>Vitamin K</b>	Helps to build bones. Helps blood to clot.	Dark green leafy vegetables (spinach, turnip and mustard greens), broccoli, Brussels sprouts

\*Fortified foods have added vitamins and minerals.

## Do I need a vitamin and mineral pill?

Some people might need a vitamin and mineral pill if they are not able to get all the nutrition they need from food. If you aren't sure whether you should take a supplement, ask your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist.

Talk to your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist if any of the following apply to you:

- You eat less than the suggested amount of food for your age and gender in Canada's Food Guide.
- You are pregnant. Choose a multivitamin and mineral pill that has 16 to 20 mg of iron to meet your higher iron needs.
- You are pregnant, breastfeeding or could become pregnant. Take a multivitamin and mineral pill that has 400 µg (0.4 mg) of folic acid. The pill you choose should also have vitamin B<sub>12</sub>.
- You have a low intake of Milk and Alternatives. You may need calcium or vitamin D supplements.
- You don't eat very many different kinds of foods, or you avoid a whole food group because of food allergies, a low calorie diet, a medical problem, you don't tolerate the food, or you don't like the food. The kind of vitamin and mineral pill you should take depends on what foods you don't eat.
- You don't eat any animal foods. Choose foods fortified with vitamin B<sub>12</sub> or take a vitamin B<sub>12</sub> supplement. If you follow a vegan diet you may also need iron, calcium, vitamin D, zinc, and omega-3 fat supplements.
- You are over 50. Some people have trouble getting enough nutrients from food as they get older. You should take a supplement of 400 IU (10 µg) vitamin D.
- You smoke or drink a lot of alcohol. If you don't eat enough foods from the four food groups you may need to take a multivitamin and mineral pill.
- You have a medical problem, or you are not sure if you should take a vitamin and mineral pill.

## How do I choose a good vitamin and mineral pill?

- Ask a pharmacist which multivitamin or vitamin and mineral pills are good choices. Store brands or generic pills are fine to use.
- Make sure that your vitamin and mineral pill has a Drug Identification Number (DIN) or Natural Product Number (NPN). This means that Health Canada has approved the product.
- Take only the dose stated on the label. This means the amounts of vitamins and minerals you take are safe.
- Check the expiry date on the bottle. Don't take pills that are past the expiry date.
- Read labels to make sure you aren't allergic to any of the ingredients. Ask your pharmacist if you aren't sure.

## More is not better

- Taking higher amounts of vitamins and minerals is not better. Getting too much vitamins or minerals from supplements or from fortified foods can make you sick or even poison you. Remember that many foods (like vitamin waters, cookies, and energy bars) have vitamins and minerals added to them.
- Buy only supplements with DIN or NPN numbers, and take only the dose stated on the label.
- Tell your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist if you are planning to take any herbal supplement or natural health product.