Choose Food First, Supplement if Needed

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

When it comes to eating well for good health, selecting nutritious foods is the best first choice. Under certain circumstances, a dietary supplement may be needed though.

When possible, eat a variety of foods from all the food groups, including fruits and vegetables of many colors. And for the ‘all or nothing’ kind of person – wanting the best vegetables or the most effective work out or the highest fiber cereal or whole grain – know that if an all or nothing attitude leads to nothing, ‘something’ is better. So, for example, while looking for the most nutritious vegetables, eat vegetables: a carrot as a snack, a salad with lunch (on the side or pile it on a sandwich), or chop up the jicama that is on sale to eat with low-fat dressing (instead of the candy bar for a snack, sandwich with no greens or any other color veggies, and supper going by with no plant foods on the plate). Eat the old standbys or try some new ones, but eat those vegetables. It is all about choices.

But sometimes, even while trying to make the best choices, there is a legitimate reason for not getting all the nutrients a person needs from daily food intake and a supplement may be used. Keep in mind, though, that a supplement is just that – not a meal replacement or a license to make poor food choices, but a means of supplementing the nutrition intake for the day.

Those who may benefit from a dietary supplement do so for several reasons. Older adults whose systems no longer absorb certain nutrients as well may need the extra boost of a supplement. Women who are pregnant or may become pregnant are recommended to supplement their regular eating plan to get the extra nutrition they need in that stage of life. People who are unable to eat certain foods or groups of food, including vegetarians, vegans, people with celiac disease or are lactose intolerant, and those on restrictive diets (1600 calories per day or less) may also need a dietary supplement to bridge the gap.

When taking a supplement, beware – a person can get too much of a good thing. There are upper limits on some nutrients. Getting too much of certain nutrients may actually be harmful. Check with a medical professional or registered dietician before taking a supplement.

For more information on nutrients, including vitamins and minerals, their functions, where to find them in food, and when and how to use dietary supplements, University of Colorado Extension has some great guides. Dietary Supplements: Vitamins and Minerals, Fact Sheet No. 9.338, can be found at http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/foodnut/09338.pdf. Other nutrition guides can be found at http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/pubs.html#nutr_health.

For more information on these or any other topics, you can also contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

(Written 3/6/15)