

News Release From:
University of Missouri Extension
Northwest Region

For More Information Contact:
Janet M. Hackert,
Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Nutritional Supplements – Only to Help Fill the Gaps

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Wouldn't it be great if we could eat anything we wanted – chocolate cake, candy, a basket of deep-fried delights, or some other favorites – and then take a pill (also known as a “supplement”) and be as healthy as can be? But in the real world, that is *not* how it works. A nutritional supplement is only meant to fill the gaps when eating foods does not meet nutritional requirements.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a supplement is “something added, especially to make up for a lack or deficiency.” In nutritional terms, this only becomes necessary when a person is not able to eat enough food, or the right foods, to get the needed nutrients. So, for example, a young child may not need or want to eat enough food in general to get enough of one nutrient or another. Older adults lose the ability to absorb some nutrients well. Someone who is sick may not be able to digest or absorb certain nutrients, and so may need a supplement to make up the difference. Also, when people have trouble chewing, it is difficult to eat foods high in iron like meats, so to get enough iron is a struggle. A supplement may be appropriate in these types of situations. But generally a supplement is not meant to *replace* a healthy eating plan.

Supplements can help fill the gaps, but it is important to not overdo it. Supplement facts labels inform consumers as to what the supplement contains, including vitamins, minerals, essential oils, amino acids, extracts, botanicals and other ingredients. Although nutrients like vitamins and minerals are needed for healthy body functions, many have an upper limit and then they become toxic. Likewise, some ingredients that sound helpful or that are marketed as herbal, ‘all natural,’ or ‘metabolism boosters,’ for example, may have unwanted side effects or adverse interactions with prescribed or over-the-counter medications. If some is good, more is not necessarily better. Read the labels to check on specific suggested dosages and warnings. And consult a medical professional for recommendations on use. Always inform your health care team (doctors, dentists, specialists) about any supplements you may be taking.

Whether it is in pill, fizz tablet, energy bar or drink form, a supplement should be used as just that, something to fill the gaps when adequate amounts of nutrients from food cannot be consumed. And although ingredients may seem innocuous, they could actually be harmful.

For more information on nutritional supplements, or on any other topic contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local MU Extension office.