

THE
EVERYTHING
HEALTHY
LIVING SERIES

Nutrition:
Vitamins and
Minerals

*The most important information
you need to improve your health*



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The Everything® Healthy Living Series

Nutrition: Vitamins and Minerals

*The most important information you need to
improve your health*

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Introduction

For more than 10 years, millions of readers have trusted the bestselling Everything series for expert advice and important information on health topics ranging from pregnancy and postpartum care to heart health, anxiety, and diabetes. Packed with the most recent, up-to-date data, Everything health guides help you get the right diagnosis, choose the best doctor, and find the treatment options that work for you.

The Everything® Healthy Living Series books are concise guides, focusing on only the essential information you need. Whether you're looking for an overview of traditional and alternative migraine treatments, advice on starting a heart-healthy lifestyle, or suggestions for finding the right medical team, there's an Everything Healthy Living Book for you.

Nutrition

Food is everywhere. Every street has a restaurant, every event has a concession stand, and every commercial is dripping with cheese. Billboards, newspapers, and the Internet are constantly trying to sell you food. And you want to buy it. But is what's out there really something you need? Does it do your body any good? Is it making you healthy and strong? And what about the kids? How are they handling being inundated with constant food opportunities? Are they growing up healthy, lean, and fit? If they live in America, there's a good chance they aren't.

Poor nutrition is a growing problem in the United States. It's not that we don't have enough to eat. It's that we have too much of the wrong stuff to eat. You probably already know you should lay off the fast food and pick up an apple instead of that doughnut. But have you ever wondered what healthier foods could really do for you?

Did you know that eating the right carbohydrates can give you ongoing energy? Did you know that bright fruits and vegetables can help protect you against cancer? Did you know that eating right at an early age can protect kids from food allergies?

Food is fuel. It can be delicious fuel, but it can also be the wrong fuel. Like putting diesel fuel in a gasoline engine, people often choose the wrong food. Without the proper fuel and regular intervals throughout the day, you sputter and stall and will likely need a tuneup, or worse, a complete overhaul. Getting the right fuel is not mysterious, difficult, expensive, or time-consuming. *The Everything® Healthy Living Series: Nutrition* will show you exactly what, when, and how much you need to eat to get back on the road to good health.

Focusing on lifestyle changes instead of following a specific diet is the ticket to achieving optimal health, decreasing your risk of illness, increasing your energy level, improving your quality of life and well-being, and reducing your medications. In this series, you'll find everything you need to know to get your family on the road to life-long good health.

If you'd like to learn more about nutrition, check out *The Everything® Guide to Nutrition*, available in print (978-1-4405-1030-4) and eBook (978-1-4405-1159-2) formats.

All about Vitamins and Minerals

The sources of vitamins and minerals can be confusing when choosing among fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, dairy, fortified foods, and supplements. All vitamin and mineral amounts vary, so you must consume a variety of foods to maintain balanced nutrition. It's best to stay as close as you can to the mainstream of natural foods in order to meet your vitamin and mineral needs. Unfortunately, the modern individual's diet doesn't always provide the correct amount of vitamins and minerals she needs for optimal health and so some basic supplementation is often beneficial.

The Importance of Daily Vitamin Intake

Vitamins are a necessary component of a healthy diet. They are considered essential nutrients because our bodies either do not make them, or do not make enough of them. They are essential for normal body functions — cell growth, blood cell production, hormone and enzyme synthesis, energy metabolism, and proper functioning of body systems, including the immune system, nervous system, circulatory system, and reproductive system.

Because no single food contains all the vitamins you need, you must obtain them through a variety of foods. You can take a pill that contains vitamins, but it is always preferable to get them the natural way. The reason is twofold. If you take a supplement because you assume your diet is poor, you may not be supplementing the right nutrients. More importantly, getting your vitamins by eating healthy foods provides the body with many other nutrients necessary for good health, including fiber, carbohydrates, protein, and water.

Fat-Soluble Vitamins

Four of the essential vitamins are fat soluble. That means that they dissolve in fat, not water, and are stored in the body's fatty tissue and in the liver. Because they can be stored for long periods of time, people consuming a well-balanced diet do not need to supplement them. In fact, because these vitamins hang around for quite a while, they are more prone to toxicity than the water-soluble vitamins.

A normal amount of fat in the diet is necessary to metabolize these fat-soluble vitamins. They are absorbed through the large intestine, and there must be some fat present for successful absorption. After absorption, these vitamins are stored in the liver until needed.

Vitamin A

Also known as retinol, vitamin A is primarily found in animal foods, including dairy products, fish, liver, and egg yolks. It has a pro-vitamin, called beta-carotene, which is found in vegetables with orange pigment, such as carrots, sweet potatoes, and apricots, as well as some dark, leafy greens including spinach and kale.

Vitamin A is important for the health of your eyes. It is vital for night vision and the adjustments the eye regularly makes to various light levels. Vitamin A also helps keep skin healthy, promotes healthy bone and tooth growth, and is vital for proper cell division and reproduction. It strengthens and moistens mucous membranes, too, which helps you resist infections.

Essential

A pro-vitamin is not a vitamin that has renounced its amateur status. Also known as a vitamin precursor, pro-vitamins are organic compounds that, once ingested, the body converts into a vitamin.

Deficiencies are rare, but symptoms may include night blindness and seriously dry and itchy skin, as well as slow tooth and bone growth. Signs of vitamin A toxicity include dry itchy skin, nausea, and headache. Excessive amounts of beta-carotene in the body may turn skin a pale orange.

Vitamin D

Because it is naturally synthesized by sunlight on your skin, vitamin D is sometimes called the sunshine vitamin. Ten minutes in the sun is enough to give you your daily dose. During the Industrial Revolution, when people began spending more time indoors, and the skies were clouded by pollutants, rickets was rampant. Rickets is a disease in which bones do not harden properly. Scientists suspected a dietary deficiency along the same lines as scurvy, and soon found that cod liver oil eliminated the disease. It was also noted that large doses of sunshine were restorative.

Vitamin D's main function is to control the absorption of calcium, which promotes the hardening of bones and teeth. Vitamin D deficiency leads to rickets in children, and a similar affliction in adults, known as osteomalacia. It might also be a contributor to osteoporosis. These conditions occur when bone mineralization is impaired, keeping bones from hardening properly. As a result, they become soft, weak, painful, and fragile. People who are exposed to minimal sunshine, who live in areas with lots of cloud or fog cover, spend much of their time indoors, or cover themselves with sunblock, are likely candidates for vitamin D deficiency.

Because of this, vitamin D has been added to many products, most notably milk. Small amounts occur naturally in a few foods, including sardines, herring, and cod liver oil.

Toxicity of vitamin D in mild forms leads to nausea, irritability, and weight loss. Severe cases result in mental and physical growth retardation, calcium in the blood, and kidney damage.

Question

Will sunblock prevent vitamin D absorption?

Proper use of sunblock, with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15, will deflect or absorb all but 7 percent of the UVB rays that synthesize vitamin D (and cause skin cancer). But most people fail to apply sunblock properly. You need at least an ounce, or about two tablespoons, and it should be applied fifteen to twenty minutes before going outdoors so that it has ample time to penetrate. Most people apply it too late, and too sparingly, cutting its effectiveness in half. Chances are you're still getting your vitamin D.

Vitamin E

This vitamin is a powerful antioxidant. Additionally, it works to protect vitamins A and C and red and white blood cells, promotes iron metabolism, and helps maintain nervous system tissue. Some past studies suggested that vitamin E can slow the development of heart disease, but current wisdom notes that diets high in all antioxidants lower risks of cancer and coronary disease. You'll find vitamin E in seeds, whole grains, and nuts.

Deficiency in vitamin E is rare, but toxicity can occur. Symptoms include nausea and gastrointestinal disorders.

Vitamin K

This vitamin is sometimes called the Band-Aid vitamin because its primary function is to aid in the clotting of blood. In fact, the K comes from the Danish word koagulation. Vitamin K also helps hold calcium in your bones. Naturally produced by bacteria in the intestines, it can also be found in dark, leafy green vegetables, including turnip greens, spinach, broccoli, and cabbage.

Deficiency results in excessive bleeding. Because vitamin K is formed by bacteria in the intestines, bacteria-killing antibiotics can interfere with its production. Also, because it is fat soluble, people who have difficulties digesting fat may become deficient in this vitamin.

Essential

Antioxidants can slow, prevent, and reverse damage done by oxidation. Oxidation is an electron transfer process (the loss of electrons by a molecule, atom, or ion), which can produce free radicals. Free radicals damage body cells and tissues.

Water-Soluble Vitamins

Water-soluble vitamins dissolve in water, and, because your body is made mostly of water, they cannot be stored. Once ingested, they are quickly flushed out of your body through sweat and urine. In food, they are easily lost as a result of poor storage or excessive cooking. Therefore, you need a continuous supply of these vitamins to stay healthy.

Institutional food is likely to be deficient in water-soluble vitamins. Preparing food in large quantities frequently results in overcooked and reheated foods, which causes considerable loss of these nutrients.

Eight of the water-soluble vitamins were once thought to be the same compound, designated by early scientists as vitamin B. Later, they were shown to be several compounds and broken up into a group commonly known as the B complex. Cooking vegetables in water is the best way to eliminate water-soluble vitamins. Unless you are making soup, and therefore plan to consume the cooking liquid, you should steam or quickly sauté your veggies over high heat. Canned vegetables, which are subjected to high heat in the canning process, are short on B vitamins, too.

B1/Thiamin

The main function of thiamin is to create an enzyme (thiamin pyrophosphate) that is essential in the conversion of food to energy. It also contributes to the proper functioning of the nervous system by keeping the heart muscle elastic. Thiamin is found in whole grains, seeds, legumes, pork, and liver, and is fortified in many food products.

B2/Riboflavin

This vitamin's most important job is cell respiration. Oxygen and food molecules enter a cell, where enzymes release the food's and oxygen's energy. These enzymes contain riboflavin. If riboflavin is absent, the cells cannot release enough energy.

Essential

Serious athletes, who are regularly expending a lot of energy, may benefit from increased riboflavin, due to its role in protein synthesis and energy metabolism.

Riboflavin also regulates cell growth, aids in the production of red blood cells, and is important for healthy hair and skin. It helps the immune system by making antibodies and keeping mucous membranes healthy and able to fight off germs. Some studies suggest that it can be useful in reducing migraine headaches.

Riboflavin is found in dark green vegetables and whole grains. It is also present in milk products, especially cottage cheese and yogurt. Because riboflavin is easily destroyed by light, packages of cottage cheese and yogurt are typically opaque.

Riboflavin deficiency results in dry cracked skin, especially around the mouth and nose. Eyes can also become sensitive to light. There is no known toxicity.

B3/Niacin

Niacin is another enzyme-producing B vitamin that assists the release of energy from cells. In addition, niacin helps control glucose levels in blood. It is also necessary for healthy nervous and digestive systems.

Niacin is found in high-protein foods such as fish, meat, poultry, peanuts, and in whole grains. When corn became a staple food of the poor throughout Europe, South America, and the southern United States, the niacin-deficiency disease pellagra became widespread. Symptoms include

dermatitis, skin lesions, swollen tongue, mental confusion, aggression, and dementia.

The best source of niacin is the amino acid tryptophan, found in much of the animal protein you eat. Half of this amino acid is converted to niacin in the body. Vegans, who do not eat animal protein, run the risk of niacin deficiency.

B5/Pantothenic Acid

This vitamin, found in every food and made by intestinal bacteria, is important in the creation of enzymes that enable the conversion of fat and carbohydrates into energy. It is also important in hormone and red blood cell formation.

There is no recommended amount because it is so readily available in food. The best source for B5 is organ meat, but it is also plentiful in salmon, whole grains, eggs, beans, and milk. Frozen meat that has been defrosted, however, loses half of its pantothenic acid.

Deficiency has only been witnessed in lab studies and results in fatigue, mood swings, nausea, and cramps.

Essential

Some endurance athletes claim pantothenic acid helps them train harder. Extra B5 is taken to better release energy from fats and carbs and to incur less lactic acid buildup. To date, extensive research into these claims has not been conducted, however.

B6/Pyridoxine

This vitamin builds more than sixty enzymes, working for your immune and nervous systems and helping form red blood cells. It turns the protein you eat into proteins your body needs and helps convert carbohydrates into energy.

B6 is best found in high-quality protein foods such as chicken and fish. It occurs in dairy products, but not in large amounts, so again,

vegetarians are frequently deficient. Deficiency symptoms include getting sick frequently because the immune system is weakened. Anemia, a low red blood cell count, is also common with B6 deficiency.

Some medications cause excretion of B6, including drugs for high blood pressure, asthma, arthritis, and birth control, as does alcohol. Toxicity is possible with large doses, more than 2,000 milligrams per day. B6 toxicity causes neurological damage. Symptoms can include tingling or numbness, and difficulty walking.

B9/Folic Acid

This vitamin is essential for strong bodies. It aids in protein metabolism, helps new red blood cell formation, and has been shown to prevent spine and brain birth defects and lower the risk of heart disease.

Beans are a good source of folic acid, as are spinach, asparagus, and chicken and beef liver. As with all water-soluble vitamins, folic acid is easily lost in cooking. Deficiencies cause anemia, nausea, sore tongue, headache, and weakness. Because B vitamins work together synergistically, if you're low in one you are usually low in them all.

Deficiency in folic acid can also be a sign of cancer. Cancer cells use up folic acid to fuel their cell division. Toxicity from folic acid is not a concern, as excess is excreted. Too much folic acid, however, can mask a rare type of anemia caused by a deficiency of B12.

Essential

Anemia is the most common blood disorder, classified as a deficiency of red blood cells or hemoglobin. It can be caused by loss of blood, destruction of red blood cells, or insufficient red blood cells. Symptoms include weakness, fatigue, lack of concentration, and in extreme cases, shortness of breath and heart failure.

Biotin, Choline, and Inositol

You do not need to consume these vitamins because they are made in adequate amounts by the bacteria in your intestines, but they are worth mentioning as they work closely with the other B vitamins, converting your food into energy. Biotin, in particular, helps you utilize fats and proteins. Choline and inositol work together in the formation of neurotransmitters, crucial for brain function, cell membranes, and to move fats out of your liver. Toxicity is unknown and deficiency is rare.

Vitamin C

This is arguably the king of all vitamins. Also known as ascorbic acid, vitamin C plays an important role in more than 300 functions in the body. It is the body's main antioxidant; it protects the immune system, helps build collagen for connective tissues, and heals wounds. Vitamin C is vital in the absorption of iron and calcium. It helps maintain blood vessels, bones, teeth, and the formation of brain hormones.

Vitamin C is associated with citrus fruit, which contains a lot of it, but vitamin C is also found in leafy greens, especially watercress, as well as kiwi fruit, peppers, potatoes, broccoli, strawberries, and tomatoes. Vitamin C requirements are increased by smoking, stress, allergies, birth control pills, antibiotics, and fever.

Deficiency results in scurvy, a disease whose symptoms include spots on legs, sore and bleeding gums, tooth loss, wounds that reopen, and eventually death. British sailors were given a daily ration of lime to prevent scurvy (that's where the nickname "limey" originated). Because such deficiencies are easily treatable with vitamin C, fatalities today are rare.

The Main Minerals

Minerals are not as easily destroyed by overcooking or improper handling as vitamins. Minerals are absorbed through your intestines and transported throughout the body by blood or proteins. These elements can be stored in

various forms, so toxicity is a more serious concern. In fact, megadosing of minerals can be quite dangerous. Scientists are still learning about minerals, especially the trace minerals. Supplements are rarely needed, with the exception of iron, which is a very common deficiency.

Science has subdivided minerals into those you need more than 100 milligrams per day of, and those you need less than 100 milligrams a day of, known as trace minerals.

Calcium

This is the most abundant mineral in the body. You store 98 percent of it in your bones, 1 percent in your teeth, and the last 1 percent circulates around in your blood. It is extremely common for people to be deficient in calcium. Women are prone to deficiency, typically getting only about half of what they need from their regular diet.

Calcium is a crucial element in the normal formation of teeth and bones. With healthy amounts of calcium, human bone growth occurs naturally until middle age, at which time bone loss begins. Calcium deficiency limits growth throughout the early years, making adult bones thin and brittle. The effect can be slowed when calcium intake is increased.

Calcium also helps muscles contract. It is necessary for the production of enzymes and hormones involved in digestion and the conversion of nutrients into energy. It works with vitamin D to regulate blood calcium levels, and it helps blood clot.

Milk is the best source of calcium, but not the only one. Broccoli, kale, spinach, beans, and nuts are all excellent sources. Many foods, including cereal, orange juice, and bread, are fortified with calcium.

Calcium absorption can also be inhibited by certain drugs, including cortisone and other steroids, cholesterol-lowering drugs, thyroid drugs, antacids, alcohol, and tobacco.

Phosphorus

This mineral is found in all food, and the average diet provides plenty. Phosphorus works together with calcium to strengthen your bones and teeth. Like calcium, phosphorus circulates in the bloodstream and goes where it's needed, releasing energy from fat, protein, and carbohydrates. It also contributes to genetic material.

Like calcium, phosphorus is available in milk, as well as meat, poultry, fish eggs, beans, and whole grains. Phosphoric acid is also used in the production of soda pop. There are no good plant sources for phosphorus.

Magnesium

Magnesium is part of the pigment chlorophyll, found in green plants, including spinach and other green leafy vegetables. It can also be found in nuts, beans, and milk.

This mineral is in every tissue, and is necessary in the creation of energy-converting enzymes. It is also utilized in the formation of bones and teeth. Magnesium is used in the prevention of heart rhythm problems and high blood pressure. It is also thought to help prevent migraines and premenstrual syndrome (PMS).

Potassium, Sodium, and Chloride: The Electrolytes

Collectively, potassium, sodium, and chloride are referred to as the electrolytes. These electrically charged minerals dissolve in body fluid. They carry nutrients in and out of the cells, help send messages along the nerves, and control blood pressure. They are found throughout the body, dissolved in water. When you excrete liquids, your electrolytes need to be replaced.

Potassium is found in all living cells. A well-balanced diet contains lots of potassium derived from several sources, but certain foods are particularly high in potassium, including potatoes, legumes, prunes, and avocados. You are likely to get plenty of sodium and chloride because they

are found in table salt — in fact, you probably get too much. They are not found just in the shaker, but in prepared foods, too.

Essential

Sports drinks are great for fluid and electrolyte recovery after prolonged activity. The liquid is absorbed quickly, and these drinks contain a good balance of nutrients. But they can be expensive. Make your own by blending $\frac{1}{2}$ cup orange juice, 1 quart water, 1 teaspoon salt, and 1 tablespoon honey. Mix well and chill.

Potassium is found within the cells. Sodium and chloride remain outside the cells, in fluid. Sodium and chloride intake should never be higher than that of potassium. A healthy intake that keeps fluids in balance is considered to be five parts potassium to one part sodium and chloride. If that ratio changes, high blood pressure results. High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, kidney disease, and stroke. Potassium exists in almost every food, but because most people consume too much salt, they need to supplement with potassium to stay in balance.

Chloride is also part of hydrochloric acid, the acid in your stomach that aids digestion and kills bad bacteria. It's not a mineral you need to worry about, though. Because you probably get plenty of salt in your diet, you are getting enough chloride.

Sodium and Your Health

What is commonly called table salt is sodium chloride (NaCl). It is a combination of the two minerals sodium and chloride, in a 40:60 ratio. You need both minerals, but only in very small quantities. They occur naturally in most foods, but you get the majority of your sodium from manufactured food products. Canned soups and vegetables, condiments, baked goods, chips, and other snack foods are loaded with added salt. It is used in preserving, stabilizing, and flavoring.

As an electrolyte, sodium is essential to keep your body fluids in balance, regulate your blood pressure, spark nerve impulses, relax muscles, and digest proteins and carbohydrates.

How Much Salt?

There is no recommended amount of sodium, because people are in no danger of deficiency. Modern Americans consume 4,000 to 6,000 milligrams of salt every day. The recommended limit is 2,400 milligrams (just under 1 teaspoon), but your body only needs about 400 milligrams a day (less than $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon).

Excessive sodium intake can be problematic. Eating too much sodium on occasion is not uncommon, but most of it is excreted in sweat and urine, with the help of your kidneys. You may have experienced a bloated feeling after a particularly salty meal. You most certainly experienced the thirst that follows. Thirst is your body's attempt to regulate fluid balance by sending water to the cells, commonly referred to as water retention. The craving is the body's way of telling you to drink up.

Sodium and High Blood Pressure

When the kidneys don't work properly to rid the body of excess sodium, a swelling in your feet and legs occurs, known as edema. Excessive sodium intake is a contributing factor to osteoporosis, as well as high blood pressure, also known as hypertension.

As blood flows through your arteries, pressure is created against the arterial wall. If sodium is not eliminated, it accumulates in the blood. Water is added to compensate for the imbalance and blood volume increases, leading to high blood pressure. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is a result of too much pressure being placed on the arterial wall.

Hypertension is considered a risk factor in coronary artery disease, kidney disease, and stroke. Although not a direct result of sodium intake, elevated sodium levels in combination with other risk factors, including

age, heredity, obesity, smoking, alcohol consumption, and limited physical activity, can lead to health problems.

Decreasing Your Sodium Intake

If you are concerned about your sodium intake, you have several options. Simply cutting back slowly is probably the best course of action. Unless you have serious hypertension and your doctor has instructed you to quit cold turkey, cut back slowly and let your taste buds become accustomed to the flavor of the foods themselves, not the salt.

Check the labels of the foods you regularly buy, then choose lower sodium replacements. Salt substitutes are another option, unless you have a sensitivity to potassium. Most substitutes replace at least a portion of sodium chloride with potassium chloride.

Keep track of your daily salt intake. Nutrition fact panels on packaged and canned foods have made it easy to determine how much salt you're eating. Total up the daily value percentage of sodium in the foods you consume each day, and try to keep it at or below the 2,400 milligrams recommended limit.

Question

How can I easily reduce my salt intake?

First of all, taste your food before you salt it. You may find it tastes fine as it is! Also, do not salt your food as you cook it. Instead, use only the salt on the table. You'll add less overall, and you'll notice it more. Another trick for reducing salt intake is to abandon the salt shaker in favor of the old-fashioned salt cellar. This is a small covered container with a tiny spoon. You have more control over how much salt you use, and you'll use less.

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