



Vitamins: what to pop, what to drop

Millions of us make up for our diet downfalls with vitamin and mineral supplements. But, asks Heather Beresford, is our pill-popping habit doing us more harm than good?

Photographs Ian Skelton

In our time-challenged lives, where energy is the first thing to go, supplements are the Holy Grail of wellbeing – little ‘health Smarties’ that can cancel our ailments and make a just-too-tired-for-organic-broccoli lifestyle all better again. In 2003, Britons spent nearly £400 million on health supplements, a figure that rose by nearly 12 per cent from the previous year. But are they really the quick fix they’re cracked up to be, or, as we self-diagnose one ‘deficiency’ after another, could we be doing ourselves more harm than good?

‘It’s much easier to take a pill than to examine why you are suffering mood swings or exhaustion,’ says Ian Marber, nutrition therapist at the Food Doctor clinic in London. ‘People believe food alone is not nutritious enough, which is wrong. I see clients coming in with bags full of self-prescribed supplements. It makes them feel empowered.’

Nobody doubts we need vitamins and minerals – serious deficiencies can cause a host of diseases. For example, vitamin C has all but ended scurvy, vitamin D prevents rickets, iron builds blood, and calcium is essential for bone growth. But, according to many nutritionists, a varied diet should

provide you with all the nutrients you need for good health. In reality though, most of us might put away five portions of fruit and vegetables on virtuous days, but the rest of the time we eat on the run, ditching carrot sticks for crisps.

‘It’s better to get nutrients through food because you consume a range of naturally occurring components, which then interact the way they were intended to by nature,’ says Pamela Mason, a pharmacist and consultant for the Health Supplements Information Service. ‘But the National Diet & Nutrition Survey in 2002 found most people were slightly deficient in a wide range of vitamins and minerals. That’s why, if you think your diet is lacking, we recommend multivitamins, because they’re low-dose but effective.’

But it’s single vitamins and minerals that are making headlines. Recently, the John Hopkins School of medicine in Baltimore found that taking over 400mg of vitamin E daily could raise the risk of premature death. Also, people taking high doses of vitamin A may be slowly weakening their bones – research carried out in 2002 showed that long-term intakes of this vitamin at twice the recommended daily

allowance (RDA) of 0.6mg a day, were linked to greater risk of bone fracture.

Some people do need supplements – women trying to get pregnant should take folic acid to reduce the risk of birth defects, such as spina bifida, in their babies (keep to RDAs as research has shown very high levels may be linked to breast cancer); women with heavy periods may need iron; anyone who avoids dairy should consider calcium and children who don’t eat much should take vitamins A, C, and D. But doses taken should be kept low, otherwise you are at risk of vitamin toxicity – the symptoms of which include cramping and diarrhoea.

Emma Johnson, 29, believes she triggered an underlying condition by taking a cocktail of mega-dose supplements, including 1,000mg of vitamin C, 100mg of vitamin E, 800mg of vitamin A, 5mg of vitamin B12 and 25mg of selenium. ‘One day I suddenly flushed bright red and was burning hot. But it went away so I ignored it. The next

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