

The Scoop

A Newsletter for Consumers



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Multivitamins—do you need one? And which one should you choose?

Most people have heard of multivitamin/mineral supplements, commonly called multivitamins. But did you know that there is no standard multivitamin? Manufacturers choose which ingredients—and how much—to include in their products. Because of this, store shelves are filled with hundreds of multivitamins with different formulations.

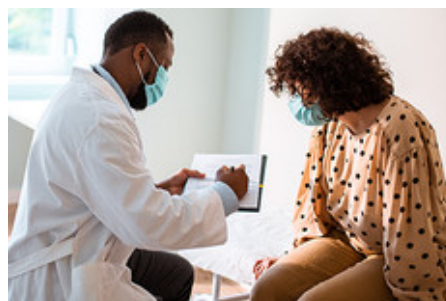
How do you know if you need a multivitamin and which product you should choose? Here's a handy guide.

Q. Do I need a multivitamin?

A. Not necessarily. Multivitamins can help you get enough of essential vitamins and minerals, but many people get all they need by eating a nutritious variety of foods. Plus, most studies show that multivitamins have little or no effect on the risk of chronic diseases such as cancer or heart disease.

People who might benefit from taking certain nutrients found in multivitamins include the following:

- People over 50
- People who could become pregnant
- Pregnant people
- Breastfed babies and toddlers
- People who avoid certain foods or have poor diets



If you fall into one of these categories, see our recently updated [multivitamin/mineral fact sheet](#) for more details. But for specific advice, we recommend talking with your healthcare provider.

Q. I am overwhelmed by the multivitamin choices at my store. Which product should I buy?

A. Talk with your healthcare provider for advice. Your provider can help you find an appropriate multivitamin.



Consider choosing a multivitamin designed for your age, sex, and whether you are pregnant or breastfeeding. The recommended amounts of vitamins and minerals differ from person to person, and many multivitamin manufacturers take this into account when formulating products. For example, multivitamins for women usually have more iron and folic acid than those for men. Multivitamins for seniors usually provide more calcium and vitamins D and B12, and less iron than those for younger adults.

Prenatal multivitamins often provide vitamin A as beta-carotene and have higher amounts of iron. Most

children's multivitamins have smaller amounts of many nutrients.

Our [vitamin and mineral fact sheets](#) list the recommended intakes for all nutrients based on your age, sex, and whether you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Want to compare products from home? Use our [Dietary Supplement Label Database](#) to search for and compare thousands of dietary supplement products on the market, including many multivitamins.

Q. Do multivitamins have any safety concerns?

A. Not for most people. Taking a basic multivitamin is unlikely to harm your health, assuming the product is properly manufactured. Most products contain reasonable amounts of vitamins and minerals and can help ensure you get enough essential nutrients without causing any harm.

However, some vitamins and minerals can be harmful if you get too much, that is, more than the upper limits. So, check product labels and don't "double up" on multivitamins or other dietary supplements unless your healthcare provider has told you to do so. And keep in mind that some foods are fortified with extra vitamins and minerals. These also count toward the upper limits.

Our [vitamin and mineral fact sheets](#) list the upper limits for all nutrients.



If you smoke or used to smoke, you should avoid multivitamins that have high amounts of beta-carotene or vitamin A. Studies show that smokers who take more than 20 milligrams (mg) a day of beta-carotene or more than 7,500 micrograms (mcg) a day of vitamin A might have a higher risk of lung cancer. Most multivitamins have lower amounts of these ingredients, but check labels to be sure.

If you are pregnant, don't get too much vitamin A—more than about 2,800 mcg a day—because it increases the risk of birth defects. This is not a concern for beta-carotene, the form of vitamin A in plant foods such as carrots and some dietary supplements.

For more information on multivitamins, see our recently updated [multivitamin/mineral fact sheet](#).



¿Habla español?

Consulte [nuestra información basada en la ciencia](#) para ayudarle a tomar las mejores decisiones para su salud con respecto al uso de suplementos dietéticos.

Have more questions about dietary supplements? Ask the Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS).

ODS provides general information about dietary supplement ingredients in response to questions from consumers, health professionals, students, and others. While ODS cannot answer specific medical questions, make referrals, or give personal guidance on the use of dietary supplements, ODS's registered dietitians on staff reply to each inquiry and give useful, scientific, and evidence-based information. Send your questions about dietary supplements to ODS: ods.od.nih.gov/contact.



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Contact Us

Office of Dietary Supplements
National Institutes of Health
6705 Rockledge Drive (Rockledge I)
Room 730, MSC 7991
Bethesda, MD 20817

Email: ods@nih.gov

Website: <https://ods.od.nih.gov>