

Smart Talk About Nutritional Supplements

by **Cindy Rabey, RN**

A holistic approach to nutrition takes in the total person, including eating habits, lifestyle, and exercise patterns. Products we might take to supplement our diet are part of that picture.

A healthy diet can meet all of our nutritional requirements, but not everyone eats a balanced diet all the time. This is where supplements come in. The most familiar supplements are vitamins, minerals, herbs and other plant products, and amino acids. While supplements cannot take the place of healthy foods, they can help maintain the delicate balance of vitamins and minerals that enable our bodies to develop properly and resist disease.

It is important to do your homework and talk to your doctor before you decide to start taking a nutritional supplement. A few things to consider:

- Herbs are plants used as food or medicine. Although many have been used for healing for many centuries, the fact that they are “natural” does not mean that they are safe for everyone.
- Packaging and claims may be misleading. Unlike medicines, herbs and other supplements are not strictly controlled by the FDA for effectiveness, safety, purity, potency, and consistency from one batch to another.
- While herbs and other supplements may be packaged like medicines, their manufacturers do not have to prove that they are safe and effective. Do not rely on packaging or advertising to check out safety and effectiveness. Do your homework and talk to your doctor.
- It is important to know how much of a supplement you can take safely and for how long. Taking large doses of certain supplements, or taking them for a long time, can be dangerous.
- Some supplements can interfere with your medications and others should be avoided if you have certain medical conditions.
- Some supplements must be discontinued at least 2 weeks before surgery.

Supplements do have their place. For example, many adolescents need more calcium and iron than they get from traditional foods. During the teen years, 1200-1500 mg of calcium is needed each day. There's lots of calcium in milk, yogurt, cheese, and fortified orange juice or fortified cereals, but sometimes adolescents don't have that much in their daily diet. If you take a calcium supplement to make up the difference, take it according to directions.

Teens with little meat in their diets and girls who have begun to menstruate may need supplemental iron. (PS: If you are taking both iron and calcium, don't take them at the same time.) Once adolescent girls have begun puberty, they also need to make sure they get 400 micrograms of folic acid.

Smart and thoughtful use of supplements can be part of a healthy lifestyle. Before you try a supplement talk to your doctor and check out a few of the Web sites on this page. It's all part of taking responsibility for your good health!

Internet Resources for Teens and Parents

There is a lot of information about nutritional supplements on the Internet. Some teen sites even offer online answers to your questions. Check out the sites below for reliable information.

Sites for teens*

<http://www.ny2aap.org/herbs/>

Sponsored by adolescent medicine specialists, this site features detailed information about herbal products and nutritional supplements.

<http://kidshealth.org>

On the TeensHealth site sponsored by The Nemours Center for Children's Health Media, look for an article titled “Dietary Supplements: Facts vs Fads”

* *Some teen sites are not appropriate for younger children.*

Sites for teens and adults

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov>

Click on “Dietary Supplements” and then “General Information” for links to *Tips for the Savvy Supplement User* and *An FDA Guide to Dietary Supplements* on this site, sponsored by the FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition

http://www.nof.org/prevention/calcium_supplements.htm

Information about calcium supplements from the National Osteoporosis Foundation

<http://www.cc.nih.gov/ccc/supplements>

The National Institutes of Health offer *Facts About Dietary Supplements* at this address.

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic>

This site houses the Food and Nutrition Information Center at the National Agricultural Library.

<http://dietary-supplements.info.nih.gov>

The National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements, including links to the International Bibliographic Information on Dietary Supplements (IBIDS) database

Resources are included as sources of general information only. Their content has not been reviewed or endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics

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