

Vitamins and Minerals

Breakfast cereals advertise that they're packed with vitamins and minerals. Sports drinks claim they can rev up your flagging energy with a jolt of vitamins or minerals (sorry, but even powerful vitamins and minerals can't act that fast!). You know vitamins and minerals are good for you. But which ones does your body really need? And is it possible to get too much of a good thing?

What Are Vitamins and Minerals?

Vitamins and minerals make people's bodies work properly. Although you get vitamins and minerals from the foods you eat every day, some foods have more vitamins and minerals than others.

Vitamins fall into two categories: fat soluble and water soluble. The **fat-soluble** vitamins — A, D, E, and K — dissolve in fat and can be stored in your body. The **water-soluble** vitamins — C and the B-complex vitamins (such as vitamins B6, B12, niacin, riboflavin, and folate) — need to dissolve in water before your body can absorb them. Because of this, your body can't store these vitamins. Any vitamin C or B that your body doesn't use as it passes through your system is lost (mostly when you pee). So you need a fresh supply of these vitamins every day.

Whereas vitamins are organic substances (made by plants or animals), minerals are inorganic elements that come from the soil and water and are absorbed by plants or eaten by animals. Your body needs larger amounts of some minerals, such as calcium, to grow and stay healthy. Other minerals like chromium, copper, iodine, iron, selenium, and zinc are called **trace minerals** because you only need very small amounts of them each day.

What Do Vitamins and Minerals Do?

Vitamins and minerals boost the immune system, support normal growth and development, and help cells and organs do their jobs. For example, you've probably heard that carrots are good for your eyes. It's true! Carrots are full of substances called **carotenoids** that your body converts into vitamin A, which helps prevent eye problems.

Another vitamin, vitamin K, helps blood to clot (so cuts and scrapes stop bleeding quickly). You'll find vitamin K in green leafy vegetables, broccoli, and soybeans. And to have strong bones, you need to eat foods such as milk, yogurt, and green leafy vegetables, which are rich in the mineral calcium.

Fuel for Growth

People go through a lot of physical changes — including growth and puberty — during their teenage years. Eating right during this time is especially important because the body needs a variety of vitamins and minerals to grow, develop, and stay healthy.

Eating a variety of foods is the best way to get all the vitamins and minerals you need each day, as well as the right balance of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, and calories. Whole or unprocessed foods — like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, fish, and poultry — are the best choices for providing the nutrients your body needs to stay healthy and grow properly.

It's OK to eat foods like potato chips and cookies once in a while, but you don't want to overdo high-calorie foods like these that offer little nutritionally.

To choose healthy foods, check food labels and pick items that are high in vitamins and minerals. For example, if you're choosing beverages, you'll find that a glass of milk is a good source of vitamin D and the minerals calcium, phosphorous, and potassium. A glass of soda, on the other hand, doesn't have any vitamins or minerals.

You can also satisfy your taste buds without sacrificing nutrition while eating out: Vegetable pizzas or fajitas, sandwiches with lean cuts of meat, fresh salads, and baked potatoes are just a few delicious, nutritious choices.

If you're a vegetarian, you'll need to plan carefully for a diet that offers the vitamins and minerals found primarily in meats. The best sources for the minerals zinc and iron are meats, fish, and poultry. However, you can get zinc and

iron in dried beans, seeds, nuts, and leafy green vegetables like kale.

Vitamin B12, which is important for manufacturing red blood cells, is not found in plant foods. If you don't eat meat, you can find vitamin B12 in eggs, milk and other dairy foods, and fortified breakfast cereals. Vegans (vegetarians who eat no animal products at all, including dairy products) may need to take vitamin supplements.

If you're thinking about becoming a vegetarian, talk to your doctor or a dietitian about how to plan a healthy, balanced diet.

Common Concerns

Lots of teens wonder if they should take vitamin or mineral supplements. If your diet includes a wide variety of foods, including whole-grain products, fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, nuts, seeds, eggs, and meats, then you are probably getting the vitamins and minerals your body needs.

But if you're skipping meals, dieting, or if you're concerned that you're not eating enough items from a particular category, such as vegetables or dairy products, then talk to your doctor or to a dietitian. These professionals can help you create an eating plan that includes the nutrients your body needs.

Check with your doctor before taking vitamin or mineral supplements. Some people think that if something is good for you, then the more you take in, the healthier you'll be. But that's not necessarily true when it comes to vitamins and minerals. For example, fat-soluble vitamins or minerals, which the body stores and excretes more slowly, can build up in your system to levels where they could cause problems.

There are hundreds of supplements on the market and of course their manufacturers want you to purchase them. Beware of unproven claims about the benefits of taking more than recommended amounts of any vitamin or mineral. A healthy teen usually doesn't need supplements if he or she is eating a well-rounded diet.

Your best bet for getting the vitamins and minerals you need is to eat a wide variety of healthy foods and skip the vitamin pills, drinks, and other supplements. You'll feel better overall and won't run the risk of overdoing your vitamin and mineral intake.

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