A doctor’s prescription is not needed. Some supplements are added to foods, including drinks. Sometimes, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs or supplements come in the form of pills, capsules, powders, gel tabs, extracts, or liquids. Like osteoporosis or arthritis. Dietary supplements are substances you might use to add nutrients to your diet. And, are they safe? Ads everywhere? Bill wonders if they work—will one help keep his joints healthy or another make you feel better, keep you from getting sick, or even help you live longer. Sometimes, there is little, if any, good scientific research supporting these claims. Some dietary supplements will give you nutrients that might be missing from your daily diet. But eating healthy foods is the best way to get the nutrients you need. Others may cost a lot or might not benefit you the way you like. Some supplements can change how medicines you may already be taking will work. You should talk to your doctor or a registered dietician for advice.

What If I’m Over 50?
People over 50 need more of some vitamins and minerals than younger adults do. Your doctor or a dietician can tell you whether you need to change your diet or take vitamins to get minerals to get to or near the amounts your body needs. However, as people grow older, some have trouble absorbing vitamin B₁₂ naturally found in food. Instead, they can choose foods, like fortified cereals, that have this vitamin added or use a B₁₂ supplement.

Calcium. Calcium works with vitamin D to keep bones strong at all ages. Bone loss can lead to fractures in both older women and men. Vitamin D is found in milk and milk products (fat-free or low-fat is best), canned fish with soft bones, dark-green leafy vegetables like spinach, and foods with added or naturally occurring calcium.

Vitamin D. Some people’s bodies make enough vitamin D if they are in the sun for 10 to 15 minutes at least twice a week. But, if you are older, you may not be able to get enough vitamin D that way. Try adding vitamin D-fortified milk and milk products, vitamin D-fortified cereals, and fatty fish to your diet, and/or use a vitamin D supplement.

Vitamin B₁₂. This vitamin is needed to form red blood cells. It is found in milk and milk products (fat-free or low-fat is best), canned fish with soft bones, dark-green leafy vegetables like spinach, and foods with added calcium.

Different Vitamin and Mineral Recommendations for People Over 50

The National Academy of Sciences recommends how much of each vitamin and mineral men and women of different ages need. Sometimes, the Academy also tells us how much of a vitamin or mineral is too much.

Vitamin E—2.4 mcg (micrograms) each day if you are taking medicine for acid reflux, you might need a different form, which your health care provider can give you
Calcium—1200 mg (milligrams), but not more than 2500 mg a day
Vitamin D—400 IU (International Units) for people age 51 to 70 and 600 IU for those over 70, but not more than 2000 IU each day
Vitamin B₁₂—1.7 mcg for men and 1.5 mcg for women each day

When thinking about whether you need more of a vitamin or mineral, think about how much of each nutrient you get from food and drinks, as well as from any supplements you take. Check with a doctor or dietician to learn whether you need to supplement your diet.

What Are Antioxidants? You might hear about antioxidants in the news. These are natural substances found in food that might help protect you from some diseases. They are some common sources of antioxidants that you should be sure to include in your diet:

- Beta-carotene—fruits and vegetables that are either dark green or dark orange
- Selenium—seafood, liver, meat, and grains
- Vitamin C—citrus fruits, peppers, tomatoes, and berries
- Vitamin E—wheat germ, nuts, sesame seeds, and Canola, olive, and peanut oils

Right now, research results suggest that large doses of supplements with antioxidants will not prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes. In fact, some studies have suggested that taking large doses of some antioxidants could be harmful. All in all, it is best to check with your doctor before taking a dietary supplement.

What About Herbal Supplements? Herbal supplements are dietary supplements that come from plants. A few that you may have heard of are gingko biloba, ginseng, echinacea, and black cohosh. Researchers are looking at using herbal supplements to prevent or treat some health problems. It’s too soon to know if herbal supplements are both safe and useful. But, studies of some have not shown benefits.

Are Dietary Supplements Safe? Scientists are still working to answer this question. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) checks prescription medications, such as antibiotics or blood pressure medications, to make sure they are safe and do what they promise. The same is true for over-the-counter drugs like pain and cold medicines. But the FDA does not consider dietary supplements to be medicines. The FDA does not watch over dietary supplements in the same way it does prescription medicines. The Federal Government does not regularly test what is in dietary supplements. So, just because you see a dietary supplement on a store shelf does not mean it is safe or that it even does what the label says it will or contains what the label says it contains.
Dietary Supplements

Bill's retired and lives alone. Often he's just not hungry or is too tired to fix a meal. Does he need a multivitamin, or should he take one of those dietary supplements he sees in ads everywhere? Bill wonders if they will... will one help keep his joints healthy or another give him more energy? And, are they safe?

What Is a Dietary Supplement?

Dietary supplements are substances you might use to add nutrients to your diet or to lower your risk of health problems. Dietary supplements come in the form of pills, capsules, powders, gel tabs, extracts, or liquids. They might contain vitamins, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs or other plants, or enzymes. Sometimes, there is little, if any, good scientific research supporting these claims. Some dietary supplements will give you nutrients that might be missing from your daily diet. But eating healthy foods is the best way to get the nutrients you need. Others may cost a lot or might not benefit you the way you would like. Some supplements can change how medicines you may already be taking will work. You should talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian for advice.

What If I'm Over 50?

People over 50 need more of some vitamins and minerals than younger adults do. Your doctor or a dietitian can tell you whether you need to change your diet or take vitamins or minerals to get enough of:

**Vitamin B₁** Vitamin B₁ helps keep your red blood cells and nerves healthy. As people grow older, some have trouble absorbing vitamin B₁ naturally found in food. Instead, they can choose foods, like fortified cereals, that have this vitamin added and use a B₁ supplement.

**Calcium** Calcium works with vitamin D to keep bones strong at all ages. Bone loss can lead to fractures in both women and men. Calcium is found in milk and milk products (fat-free or low-fat is best), canned tomatoes, bananas, chicken breasts, and fortified cereals.

**Vitamin D** Some people's bodies make enough vitamin D if they are in the sun for 10 to 15 minutes at least twice a week. But, if you are older, you may not be able to get enough vitamin D that way. Try adding vitamin D-fortified milk and milk products, vitamin D-fortified cereals, and fatty fish to your diet, and/or use a vitamin D supplement.

**Vitamin B₆** This vitamin is needed to form red blood cells. It is found in milk and milk products (fat-free or low-fat is best), canned tomatoes, bananas, chicken breasts, and fortified cereals.

Different Vitamin and Mineral Recommendations for People Over 50

The National Academy of Sciences recommends how much of each vitamin and mineral men and women of different ages need. Sometimes, the Academy also tells us how much of a vitamin or mineral is too much.

Vitamin B₁₂ —2.4 mcg (micrograms) each day if you are taking medicine for acid reflux, you might need a different form, which your health care provider can give you.

Calcium —1200 mg (milligrams), but not more than 2500 mg a day.

Vitamin D —400 IU (International Units) for people age 51 to 70 and 600 IU for those over 70, but not more than 2000 IU each day.

Vitamin E —15 mg for men and 15.5 mg for women each day.

In thinking whether about you need more of a vitamin or mineral, think about how much of each nutrient you get from food and drinks, as well as from any supplements you take. Check with a doctor or dietitian to learn whether you need to supplement your diet.

What Are Antioxidants?

You might hear about antioxidants in the news. These are natural substances found in food that might help protect you from some diseases. Here are some common sources of antioxidants that you should be sure to include in your diet:

- **Beta-carotene**—fruits and vegetables that are either dark green or dark orange
- ** Selenium**—seafood, liver, meat, and grains
- **Vitamin C**—citrus fruits, peppers, tomatoes, and berries
- **Vitamin E**—wheat germ, nuts, sesame seeds, and canola, olive, and peanut oils

Right now, research results suggest that large doses of supplements with antioxidants will not prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes. In fact, studies have shown that taking large doses of some antioxidants could be harmful. Again, it is best to check with your doctor before taking a dietary supplement.

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Should I Take a Dietary Supplement?

Do you need one? Maybe you do, but usually not. Ask yourself why you think you need one. Do you want to take a dietary supplement. Are you concerned about getting enough nutrients? Is a friend, a neighbor, or someone on a commercial suggesting you take one? Some ads for dietary supplements in magazines or on TV seem to promise that these supplements will make you feel better, keep you from getting sick, or even help you live longer. Sometimes, there is little, if any, good scientific research supporting these claims. Some dietary supplements will give you nutrients that might be missing from your daily diet. But eating healthy foods is the best way to get the nutrients you need. Others may cost a lot or might not benefit you the way you would like. Some supplements can change how medicines you may already be taking will work. You should talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian for advice. Check with a doctor or dietitian to learn whether you need to supplement your diet.
**Dietary Supplements**

Bill’s retired and lives alone. Often he’s just too tired to fix a meal. Does he need a multivitamin, or should he take one of those dietary supplements he sees in ads everywhere? Bill wonders if they work—will one help keep his joints healthy or another give him more energy? And, are they safe?

**What Is a Dietary Supplement?**

Dietary supplements are substances you might use to add nutrients to your diet or to lower your risk of health problems, or to treat or prevent some other health problem. Examples include calcium, vitamin D, or omega-3 fatty acids, but there are many others. Some supplements contain ingredients that are added to foods, including drinks. They might contain vitamins, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs or other plants, or enzymes. Sometimes, supplements contain ingredients that are naturally found in food. Instead, they can choose foods, like fortified milk or milk products, that contain calcium and vitamin D to keep bones strong at all ages.

**Should I Take a Dietary Supplement?**

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**What If I’m Over 50?**

People over 50 need more of some vitamins than younger adults do. Your doctor or a dietician can tell you whether you need to change your diet or to take vitamins or minerals to get enough of these:

- **Vitamin B12**: Vitamin B12 helps keep your red blood cells and nerves healthy. As people grow older, some have trouble absorbing vitamin B12 naturally found in food. Instead, they can choose foods, like fortified cereals, that have this vitamin added and use a B12 supplement.
- **Calcium**: Calcium works with vitamin D to keep bones strong at all ages. Bone loss can lead to fractures in both older women and men. Calcium is found in milk and milk products (fat-free or low-fat is best), canned fish with soft bones, dark-green leafy vegetables like spinach, and foods with calcium added.

- **Vitamin D**: Some people’s bodies make enough vitamin D if they are in the sun for 10 to 15 minutes at least twice a week. But, if you are older, you may not be able to get enough vitamin D that way. Try adding vitamin D-fortified milk and milk products, vitamin D-fortified cereals, and fatty fish to your diet, and/or use a vitamin D supplement.
- **Vitamin B6**: This vitamin is needed to form red blood cells. It is found in potatoes, bananas, chicken breasts, and fortified cereals.

**Different Vitamin and Mineral Recommendations for People Over 50**

The National Academy of Sciences recommends how much of each vitamin and mineral men and women of different ages need. Sometimes, the Academy also tells us how much of a vitamin or mineral is too much.

For everyone age 51 to 70:
- **Vitamin B12**: 2 μg (micrograms) each day, or 3 μg if you are taking medicine for acid reflux.
- **Calcium**: 1,000 mg (milligrams) each day, or 1,200 mg if you are taking medicine for heartburn.
- **Vitamin D**: 400 IU (International Units) for people age 51 to 70 and 600 IU for those over 70, but not more than 2000 IU each day.

For everyone age 71 and older:
- **Vitamin B12**: 1.7 μg for men and 1.5 μg for women each day.

When thinking about whether you need more of a vitamin or mineral, think about how much of each nutrient you get from food and drinks, as well as from any supplements you take. Check with a doctor or dietitian to learn whether you need to supplement your diet.

**What Are Antioxidants?**

You might hear about antioxidants in the news. These are natural substances found in food that might help protect you from some diseases. There are many common sources of antioxidants that you should be sure to include in your diet:

- **Vita****c****e**: vegetables and fruits that are either dark green or dark orange—tomatoes, peppers, and grains
- **Vitamin E**: seeds, nuts, sesame seeds, and canola, olive, and peanut oil

Right now, research results suggest that large doses of supplements with antioxidants will not prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes. In fact, studies have found that taking large doses of some antioxidants could be harmful. Again, it is best to check with your doctor before taking a dietary supplement.

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If you are thinking about using dietary supplements, it will improve your health? Here's what one active older person does:

If you are reading fact sheets or checking websites, be aware of the source and the date. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.

Could the writer or group profit from a particular supplement? For more information about products that are clearly unsafe, the Federal Trade Commission looks into reports of products that are clearly unsafe. The FDA may also take these actions:

1. Tell your doctor. He or she needs to know if you decide to go ahead and use a dietary supplement. Do not diagnose or treat your health condition without first checking with your doctor.
2. Check the science. Make sure any claim made about a dietary supplement is based on scientific proof. The company making the dietary supplement should be able to send you information on the safety and/or effectiveness of the ingredients in a product, which you can then discuss with your doctor. Remember that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
3. Remember. Just because something is said to be “natural” doesn’t also mean it is either safe or good for you. It could have side effects. It might make a medicine your doctor prescribed for you either weaker or stronger.
4. Check the science. Make sure any claim made about a dietary supplement is based on scientific proof. The company making the dietary supplement should be able to send you information on the safety and/or effectiveness of the ingredients in a product, which you can then discuss with your doctor. Remember that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

What Can I Do to Stay Healthy?

Here’s what one active older person does:

When she turned 60, Pearl decided she wanted to stay healthy and active as long as possible. She was careful about what she ate. She became more physically active. Now she takes a long, brisk walk 3 or 4 times a week. In bad weather, she joins the mall walkers at the local shopping mall. When it’s nice outside, Pearl works in her garden. When she was younger, Pearl stopped smoking and kept her mind active, don’t smoke, see the NCCAM Clearinghouse.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

- Department of Agriculture
  - Food and Nutrition Information Center
    - National Agricultural Library
      - Office of Dietary Supplements
        - National Institute on Aging
          - National Institutes of Health
    - National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
      - Office of Dietary Supplements
        - National Institute on Aging
          - National Institutes of Health
If the FDA receives reports of possible problems with a supplement, it will issue warning letters about products that are clearly unsafe. The FDA may also take these supplements off the market. The Federal Trade Commission looks into reports of ads that might misrepresent what dietary supplements do.

A few private groups, such as the U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP), NSF International, ConsumerLab.com, and the Natural Products Association (NPA), have their own “seals of approval” for dietary supplements. To get such a seal, products must be made by following good manufacturing procedures, must contain what is listed on the label, and must not have harmful levels of things that don’t belong there, like lead.

What’s Best for Me?

If you are thinking about using dietary supplements:

Learn. Find out as much as you can about any dietary supplement you might take. Talk to your doctor, your pharmacist, or a registered dietitian.

Check the science. Make sure any claim made about a dietary supplement is based on scientific proof. The company making the dietary supplement should be able to send you information on the safety and/or effectiveness of the ingredients in a product, which you can then discuss with your doctor. Remember that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

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Try following Pearl’s example—stick to a healthy diet, be physically active, and, in most cases, don’t need. Don’t assume that more of something that might be good for you is even better for you.

Choose brands that your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist says are trustworthy. Don’t buy dietary supplements with ingredients you don’t need. Don’t assume that more of something that might be good for you is even better for you.

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For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Information Center
National Agricultural Library
10301 Baltimore Avenue, Room 105
Beltsville, MD 20705-2351
301-504-5414
www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

Federal Trade Commission
800 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20580
877-382-4357 (toll-free)
202-326-2222
www.ftc.gov/healthclaims

Food and Drug Administration
Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
5000 Paint Branch Parkway HFS-555
College Park, MD 20740-3835
888-725-3366 (toll-free)
www.cfsan.fda.gov

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
NCCAM Clearinghouse
Box 7925
Gaithersburg, MD 20898
888-644-6226 (toll-free)
866-464-3615 (TTY/toll-free)
www.nccam.nih.gov

National Library of Medicine
MedlinePlus
Office of Dietary Supplements
3800 Oldlim Road
Room 3B01, MSC 7377
Bethesda, MD 20892-7517
301-435-2920
www.ods.od.nih.gov

The Federal Government has several other websites with information on nutrition, including:

www.nutrition.gov—learn more about healthy eating, food shopping, assistance programs, and nutrition-related health subjects.


For information on exercise, nutrition, and health quickies and other resources on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center
PO Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
866-866-2225 (TTY/toll-free)
www.nia.nih.gov

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation.

Visit NIH Senior Health (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.
If the FDA receives reports of possible problems with a supplement, it will issue warnings about products that are clearly unsafe. The FDA may also take these products off the market. The Federal Trade Commission looks into reports of ads that might misrepresent what dietary supplements do.

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What’s Best for Me?

If you are thinking about using dietary supplements:

Remember, just because something is said to be “natural” doesn’t also mean it is either safe or good for you. It could have side effects. It might make a medicine your doctor prescribed for you either weaker or stronger.

Tell your doctor. He or she needs to know if you decide to go ahead and use a dietary supplement. Do not diagnose or treat your health condition without first checking with your doctor.

Buy wisely. Choose brands that your doctor, diettitian, or pharmacist says are trustworthy. Don’t buy dietary supplements with ingredients you don’t need. Don’t assume that more of something that might be good for you is even better for you.

Check the science. Make sure any claim made about a dietary supplement is based on scientific proof. The company making the dietary supplement should be able to send you information on the safety and/or effectiveness of the ingredients in a product, which you can then discuss with your doctor. Remember that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

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Stay Healthy?

Here’s what one active older person does:

When she turned 60, Pearl decided she wanted to stay healthy and active as long as possible. She was careful about what she ate.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

www.medlineplus.gov

National Library of Medicine

MedlinePlus

Department of Agriculture

Food and Nutrition Information Center

National Agricultural Library

10901 Baltimore Avenue, Room 105

Beltsville, MD 20705-2351

301-504-5414

www.nal.wic.gov/jsic

Federal Trade Commission

600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20580

877-382-4357 (toll-free)

202-920-2222

www.ftc.gov/healthclaims

Food and Drug Administration

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition

5000 Paint Branch Parkway HFS-555

College Park, MD 20740-3835

888-722-3366 (toll-free)

www.cfams.fda.gov

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

NCCAM Clearinghouse

Box 7925

Gaithersburg, MD 20898

888-644-6266 (toll-free)

866-464-3613 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nccam.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

NCCAM Clearinghouse

For more information about dietary supplements, see Food, Maps, and Alternative Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

www.nia.nih.gov

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Food and Nutrition Information Center

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