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EC04-472 Tips for Older Dietary Supplement Users

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What are dietary supplements?

Today's dietary supplements are not only vitamins and minerals. They also include other less familiar substances, such as herbals, botanicals, amino acids, enzymes, and animal extracts. Whatever your choice, supplements should not replace the variety of foods important to a healthful diet.

Unlike drugs, dietary supplements are not pre-approved by the government for safety or effectiveness before marketing. Also, unlike drugs, supplements are not intended to treat, diagnose, prevent, or cure diseases. Some supplements can help ensure that you get an adequate dietary intake of essential nutrients; others may help you reduce your risk of disease. At times, it can be confusing to tell the difference between a dietary supplement, a food, or over-the-counter medicines. This is because supplements, by law, come in a variety of forms that resemble these products, such as tablets, capsules, powders, energy bars, or drinks. One way to know if a product is a dietary supplement is to look for the Supplement Facts label on the product.

Are there any risks, especially to older consumers?

While certain products may be helpful to some older individuals, there may be circumstances when these products may not benefit your health or when they may create unexpected risks. Many supplements contain active ingredients that have strong biological effects in the body. This could make them unsafe in some situations and hurt or complicate your health.
Are you taking both medicines and supplements?

*Are you substituting one for the other?

Taking a combination of supplements, using these products together with medications, (whether prescription or over-the-counter), or substituting them in place of medicines your doctor prescribes could lead to harmful, even life threatening results. Be alert to any advisories about these products. Ginkgo biloba (an herbal supplement), Coumadin (prescription medicines), aspirin (an over-the-counter drug), and vitamin E (a vitamin supplement) can each thin the blood. Taking any of these products alone or together can increase the potential for internal bleeding or stroke.

*Are you planning surgery?

Some supplements can have unwanted effects before, during, and after surgery. It is important to fully inform your healthcare professional, including your pharmacist, about the vitamins, minerals, herbs, and any other supplements you are taking, especially before surgery.

*Is taking more of a good thing better?

Some people might think that if a little is good, taking a lot is even better. But taking too much of some nutrients, even vitamins and minerals, can cause problems. Depending on the supplement, your age, and the status of your health, taking more than 100% of the Daily Value (DV) (see the Supplements Facts panel) of certain vitamins and minerals, e.g. Vitamin A, Vitamin D, iron (from supplements and food sources like vitamin-fortified cereals and drinks) may actually harm your health.

Why speak to my healthcare provider about dietary supplements?

You and your health professionals (doctors, nurses, registered dietitians, pharmacists, and other caregivers) are a team working toward a common goal—to develop a personalized health plan for you. Your doctor and other members of the health team can help monitor your medical condition and overall health, especially if any problems develop. There are numerous resources that provide information about dietary supplements. These include TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, store clerks, friends, family, or the Internet. It is important to question recommendations from people who have no formal training in nutrition, botanicals, or medicine.

What are the key “points to ponder” before I buy?

*Think twice about chasing the latest headline.

Sound health advice is generally based on research over time, not a single study. Be wary of results claiming a “quick fix” that depart from scientific research and established dietary guidance.

*We may think, “Even if a product may not help me, it at least won’t hurt me.” It’s best not to assume that this will always be true.

Some product ingredients, including nutrients and plant components, can be toxic based on their activity in your body. Some products may become harmful when consumed in high enough amounts, for a long enough time, or in combination with certain other substances.

*Spend your money wisely.

Some supplement products may be expensive and may not work, given your specific condition. Be wary of substituting a product or therapy for prescription medicines. Be sure to talk with your healthcare team to help you determine what is best for your overall health.

*The term “natural” does not always mean safe.

Do not assume this term assures wholesomeness or that these products have milder effects, making them safer to use than prescribed drugs.

*Remember: Safety first.

Resist the pressure to decide “on the spot” about trying an untested product or treatment. Ask for more information and consult your doctor, nurse, dietitian, pharmacist, and/or caregiver about whether the product is right for you and safe for you to use.

What’s the bottom line?

Ask yourself the following questions and use this checklist below to talk to your doctor, nurse, dietitian, pharmacist, and/or caregiver about dietary supplements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to Ask</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is taking a dietary supplement an important part of my total diet?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I am scheduled for surgery, should I be concerned about the dietary supplements I am taking?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any precautions or warnings I should know about (e.g. is there an amount or “upper limit” I should not go above)?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any known side effects (e.g., loss of appetite, nausea, headaches, etc.)? Do they apply to me?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any foods, medicines (prescription or over-the-counter), or other supplements I should avoid while taking this product?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excerpted from: Dietary Supplements (December 2003). Food and Drug Administration, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.