

Chapter 1

Supplement ABCs

In This Chapter

- ▶ Why you need supplements
 - ▶ Choosing the best supplements for your needs
 - ▶ Starting with a basic supplement program
 - ▶ Understanding *labelese*, the language of labels
 - ▶ Knowing when and how to take your supplements
-

As a supplement buyer, you have probably pondered at some point, “Do I really need to take all these pills?” In our clinical practices, we have seen patients bring bags of them into the treatment rooms when they come in for a visit. Patients sheepishly pull out bottle after bottle with a questioning look — “Should I be taking this one?” We find that people are confused about which supplements are appropriate for everyday use, which ones can be taken with other supplements, which ones are safe to use with drugs, and whether to take supplements with meals or without food.

If you would like to simplify your supplement program, to learn how to read the labels on your supplements, and to maximize the health benefits and relief of symptoms from the supplements you buy, this chapter is for you.

Pills and More Pills — Why Bother?

You’ve probably seen a story about people living in the future who sit down to the evening meal where each person has a plate before them with a few scattered pills of various shapes and colors, and no food. The idea is that in the future, nutritional science will be so advanced that you can get all the nutrients you need every day in a few small pills. Just swallow and go about your business, full of energy and enthusiasm. This pill-taking diet is great for busy people who don’t want to be troubled by actually going to the store,

selecting fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, and dairy products, then going home and actually preparing all those foods. But what about the flavor, textures, smells, and the ritual of mealtimes? After a few days on the pill diet, we're sure you would soon start longing for the smell and taste of a great meal!

Fortunately, this scenario is not likely to happen anytime soon. You like food too much, right? But while the miracles of nutritional science can't convince us to go on an exclusive pill diet, the nutritional work of scientists around the world can give you tremendous health benefits. Through advances in the measurement of nutrients in food, and close and systematic observation of large populations of people around the world, science has helped identify the most common nutritional deficiencies and created products to help prevent associated symptoms and diseases. Following, in a nutshell, are some of the most common nutritional deficiencies, the groups of people who have them, and the reasons why you may want to consider supplementing your diet with some of the new, effective nutritional products that are available:



✔ **If you are over 65:** You are more likely to be deficient in vitamin B-12, vitamin D, vitamin K, folic acid, zinc, and other nutrients. Vitamin D deficiency is especially common (up to 57 percent). Up to 20 percent of elderly women are deficient in vitamin C. To counteract the low hormone levels that occur as you age, and to enhance your energy, supplements like DHEA, pregnenolone, and 5-HTP, may be worth a try. These supplements are called hormone precursors because they contain the building blocks for hormones. They each have different functions, including aiding in hormone production, helping to induce sleep, and balancing your moods. (See Chapter 7 for more on these hormones.)

If you have a medical condition: See your doctor or nutritionist before starting with one of the new hormone builders like DHEA or pregnenolone.

✔ **If you're a regular Joe or Jane:** Common nutrient deficiencies among the general population, especially if you eat a Standard Adulterated Diet (SAD), include at least zinc, chromium, and manganese, or a good general multivitamin. See Chapters 2 and 4 for more on these substances.

✔ **If you're pregnant and nursing:** You're more likely to be deficient in folic acid (15 to 30 percent) and iron. Check out Chapter 11 for a complete program for moms.

✔ **If you're a woman:** You're more likely to be deficient in magnesium, iron, zinc, folic acid, and possibly calcium. See Chapters 4 and 11 for more information on these supplements and a complete program for women.

What if you don't fall into one of the previous categories? How much should you worry about nutritional deficiencies? Should you run out and buy armloads of supplements? Not really, but if you fall into one of the groups in the

following list, you may want to pay more attention to your dietary intake of fresh foods that are high in nutrients and consider a few well-chosen supplements. You can benefit from supplements if you:

- ✓ Drink alcohol very often or if you abuse alcohol
- ✓ Follow a vegetarian diet
- ✓ Love junk food and don't generally consume at least five half-cup servings of fresh fruits and vegetables daily
- ✓ Choose to eat fewer than 1,500 calories daily because you're dieting, sedentary, or have an infirmity or physical handicap
- ✓ Are hospitalized
- ✓ Are a woman, especially if you're on birth control pills, pregnant, or nursing. (See Chapter 11 for a specific supplement program that can benefit you.)
- ✓ Can't afford all the nutritious foods that you know are good for you
- ✓ Have a monster sweet tooth and eat a diet high in refined sugar
- ✓ Have a mood disorder, like depression
- ✓ Often experience loose stools or chronic diarrhea
- ✓ Are obese and are 12 or younger



Even if you eat a fairly good diet, other factors can contribute to nutrient deficiencies. Modern farming methods, like the addition of synthetic fertilizers to poor, overfarmed soils, can lead to nutrient-poor food. Even with refrigeration and modern shipping methods, vegetables and fruits rapidly lose vitamins during shipping and while on display in markets. Cooking foods and buying canned foods can also reduce nutrient levels. Perhaps the biggest factor, though, is poor food choices (Americans on average get about 60 percent of their calories from cookie ingredients, such as sugar, shortening, and white flour), which reduce the amount of nutrients you receive.

Factors to Consider When You Choose Your Supplements

After looking up your symptoms or health concerns in the A-to-Z symptom guide in *Vitamins For Dummies*, you can make an informed choice about which supplements you want to try. When you're in a store, though, you may feel a little overwhelmed with all the products on the shelf. Forty brands of vitamin C, 20 of ginkgo, 10 different flax seed oil capsules. Which is best? Consider these factors:

- ✔ **Price:** Don't buy by price! If you buy the cheapest brand, you are likely to get a product with cheap ingredients. You owe yourself the best — you're worth it. But don't buy the most expensive product either. You're likely to pay for the brand name. Buy products priced in the middle range.
- ✔ **Brand:** Do buy by brand. Find a few brands you can trust and stick to them. To find reliable companies, it is often easier to shop in a natural food store or vitamin shop because the employees are likely to have more experience than those who work in a drug store or supermarket. (More and more pharmacists, however, are learning about herbs and other natural products, so if you find a pharmacist with an interest in this area, talk to him or her, too.) If you do buy from natural food stores or vitamin shops, call the companies you choose and ask them how long they have been in business. (A number of fine companies have been in business for ten or twenty years.) Although new companies often start up with good products, in our experience, these companies are much more likely to be marketing companies with less expertise. Many excellent products are also available on the Web or from mail order companies (see the Resource Guide).

Whole supplement systems

We like nutritional supplements from companies that make nutritional *systems*. Such systems provide not only pure vitamins and minerals, but also add whole food extracts like vegetable powders, green foods like spirulina, and even whole herb powders or extracts. This seems to be a sensible approach, because your body can't always deal with pure concentrated nutrients. After all, that isn't what our bodies are used to. Can we really second-guess the complete package of balanced nutrients, enzymes, and co-factors that are in the foods we eat? Taking a lot of one isolated nutrient, like iron, can lead to an imbalance of other nutrients, like copper or zinc, or can be harmful.

Get your co-factors

If you do take some isolated nutritional products, such as vitamin B-6, zinc, calcium, or beta-carotene, always take the nutrient with the other parts of its complex or group, such as the other B-vitamins or minerals. These co-factors are secondary nutrients that combine with the original nutrient to produce certain substances that your body needs or to help a reaction occur. See Chapters 3 and 4 for examples of nutrients that require co-factors. For example:

- ✓ Instead of beta-carotene by itself, take a carotenoid blend with lycopene.
- ✓ Instead of alpha-tocopherol, a form of vitamin B, take “mixed natural tocopherols.” New research shows that vitamin B works much better with all of its components.
- ✓ If you want to take vitamin B-6 for your nerves and mood, take a complete B complex as well.
- ✓ If you take calcium to build strong bones, take all the factors that are known to work with calcium, namely magnesium, vitamin D, silica, and boron. A good multivitamin generally contains most of these nutrients.

Understand the measurements

The labels disclose all the ingredients in the product and give the amounts in milligrams (mg), micrograms (mcg), and international units (IU). Check the label to see how many tablets or capsules of the product you have to take to get the recommended daily requirement. If your doctor or practitioner has recommended a particular dosage of a nutrient, be sure the product that you buy uses the same standard of measure, or check with your doctor or practitioner for the equivalent.

In this book, we use all three of these measurements for different substances, depending on how they are most frequently measured and sold.

Minimum daily requirement

Some confusion exists concerning exactly how much of a nutrient you need every day to prevent disease. Scientists and government policy-makers are often quite conservative when setting recognized standards that have to go on labels. For example, for years, researchers recommended only 60 mg of vitamin C a day. Recently, research shows that 300 mg (or more) is actually a more optimal daily intake. Many nutritionists and practitioners believe that even a gram or two is optimum.



Each person's needs are different, and these needs change depending on how much stress you are under, your diet, level of health, or consumption of drugs, alcohol, sugar, or other foods. Just because no daily minimum requirement or recommended daily allowance (RDA) has been set for a nutrient doesn't mean that it isn't valuable, or that we don't need it. In this book, we recommend amounts based on available data for safety and effectiveness, as well as our own clinical experience.

Reading supplement labels at a glance

If you're like us, you like to dive right into something new without reading the labels or instructions first. You assume that you can figure it all out without having to take the time and effort to laboriously go through all the documentation. We don't blame you, but that's why you should read this section! We explain some basic label ingredients you need to know about when buying supplements. Then you can tell at a glance whether the brand or type of supplement you have in your hands is right for you.

Look for *full disclosure* labels that list all the fillers, binders, preservatives, and coloring agents, not just the active ingredients like vitamins and minerals. Some companies have more additives than actives, which makes for a more difficult-to-swallow tablet or capsule. Plus, do you really want to swallow all the milk, sugar, cellulose, and dye some companies add to their products? You should also be sure that the product you are considering has a lot number and expiration date.



When you're trying to figure out how many tablets or capsules of a supplement to take (or buy for that matter), don't forget to look at the top of the panel that lists all the nutrients or ingredients you get in the supplement. Pay close attention to how many tablets or capsules it takes to give you the advertised amount. For example, you may look at a multivitamin product that says it delivers 100 percent of the daily recommended requirement of calcium — 1,200 mg. But how many tablets or capsules do you have to take to get the 1,200 mg? One, two, three, or even six. Remember to check the dosage before buying your product. A product that looks like a potent product and a good deal may not be such a good deal after all!

The Best Way to Take Supplements — Every Day

Vitamins come in a variety of forms, including tablets and capsules, powder, sublingual tablets, lozenges, chewables, gel capsules, and liquids. Your body assimilates and absorbs some forms more rapidly than others. The following is a quick review of the major forms of these products that you can buy and the advantages of each.

- ✓ **Capsules:** Powdered formulas and fat-soluble vitamins like vitamin E come in this form. Nutritionists often consider capsules to be easier to absorb and digest than tablets. You can open up the capsules and sprinkle the powder on your food, or, as in the case of vitamins A and E, apply the oils to your skin. Vegetarians beware: Capsules are generally made from beef or pork gelatin, so you may prefer tablets or powders. Many capsules contain preservatives. Call the company to find out more.



Capsules made from all-vegetable sources (usually starch) have recently become available. Make sure that the product says it is made with vegetable caps; otherwise, it is not, because they cost more, and so the manufacturer would definitely want to advertise this benefit.

- ✓ **Chewables:** Tasty chewable supplements are great for kids of all ages; but note that they often contain sugar, food coloring, binders, and fillers.
- ✓ **Liquid vitamins:** Liquid vitamins are the form most easy for your body to incorporate. Supplement manufacturers often make children's supplements in this form. Make sure to note whether these vitamins contain artificial colors and sweeteners.
- ✓ **Lozenges:** Lozenges are great to help ease a sore throat, symptoms of a cold, or sore gums. But lozenges often contain sugar, coloring, and other fillers.
- ✓ **Powdered vitamins:** If you have trouble digesting hard tablets, or even gelatin capsules, or you have weak digestion in general, mix these easily absorbed vitamins with water or juice. They may not always be particularly tasty, though. Powdered vitamins are also useful for people who have trouble swallowing pills.
- ✓ **Tablets:** Tablets are the most common form for supplements and have the longest shelf life. They are usually cheaper to produce and often cost less than other forms. Note, however, that tablets generally have fillers, binders, or coatings. Check the weight of the ingredients for a similar cost of a capsule product, which does not need binders, coatings, and so on. Some vitamins are available as *sublingual tablets*, meaning that you place them under your tongue and let them dissolve.



The products you buy can include a wide array of non-essential substances that can reduce the quality of the product and make for a larger, harder to swallow tablet or capsule. Fillers, such as lactose, can lead you to believe that you're getting more of an active nutrient than you actually are. Binders, such as gum arabic, are used to hold the ingredients together in a tablet. You may want to notice whether your product contains synthetic food colorings, some of which are known cancer-causing agents (in laboratory animals). Do you really need *red* or *green* vitamins?



The term *full disclosure* means that the manufacturer of the product has listed *everything* that is included in the product, including binders, fillers, coloring, and preservatives. Unfortunately, many companies do not list all the ingredients in their products — a big drawback in our opinion. Don't be shy about calling the manufacturer to ask them for a full disclosure list of everything in a particular product. You want to know this, especially if you plan on taking the product for months or years! Small amounts of a substance you don't want in your body can add up.

Some vitamin labels let you know that the product contains no sugar, salt, yeast, wheat, gluten, corn, dairy products, flavorings, or preservatives. We like to support companies that avoid these common allergens and toxins.



Sunlight causes vitamins to lose their potency, so make sure to store them in a cool, dark place. Do not store them in your bathroom, due to moisture there, or in the refrigerator after bottles have been first opened, because that will condense detrimental moisture inside. If you refrigerate some unopened bottles, don't open them until they are at room temperature.

Get the FAQs about Taking Supplements

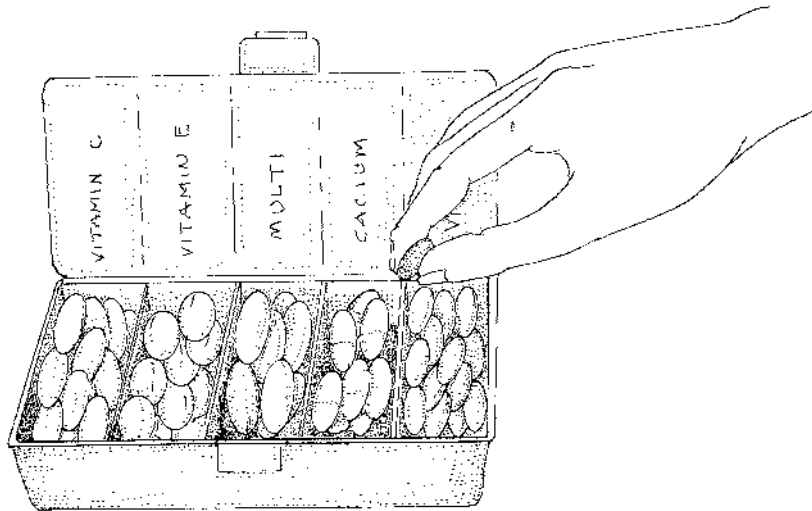
When you get into a supplement-taking routine, a number of other questions are likely to come to mind. Here we summarize the most-frequently asked questions (FAQs) from our patients, along with solutions that work for most people, including our families and ourselves.



Consistency is the key to success with supplements. We have been able to compare patients who take supplements “when they think about it,” every few days, to patients who take them daily, without fail. The steady supplement takers always get better results.

- ✔ **Should I take supplements with or without food?** Capsules, tablets, and powders are usually absorbed more completely when taken with food, because all your digestive juices are most active then.
- ✔ **What if taking a supplement makes me feel queasy?** If you have a sensitive stomach, or notice that a particular supplement makes you feel a little sick for a short time, or you don't like the oily taste of vitamin E, take the supplement just before your meal.
- ✔ **I hate taking pills — how can I keep them from getting caught in my throat?** To prevent capsules or tablets from getting stuck in your throat — often a most unpleasant experience — place them in your mouth, and swish around with a liquid, like juice or water, until the supplements become slippery, then swallow.
- ✔ **Can I take herbal tinctures with my meal? I don't like the taste.** Take liquid herbal tinctures other than at mealtimes for maximum absorption, unless they upset your stomach.
- ✔ **Do I need to take supplements at a certain time of day?** For maximum results, take supplements with the morning and evening meal. If you can only remember to take the supplement once a day, take it in the morning. A container called a *vitaminder* (shown in Figure 1-1), which contains all the supplements you need to take each day, can help you remember to take them.

Figure 1-1: A vitaminder keeps you on your toes and helps you take supplements regularly.



✓ **How long will it take to see results?** After starting with a new supplement, you may get the results you are looking for after a few days to a week. But it is much more likely that the positive benefits develop over several weeks to several months. For acute conditions, like a cold, your herbal formula or zinc lozenge should give you quick relief; but for chronic ailments, like arthritis or digestive disorders, allow several weeks. For most chronic conditions, allow about two to three months as an initial “course” of supplementation.



We recommend talking to your health care practitioner before attempting to ease symptoms or treat a serious ailment, or a long-standing (chronic) ailment. Visit your practitioner regularly for serious ailments, or, after one course of treatment — usually two or three months — for chronic ailments.

The Supplements We Take

After years of study, clinical practice, research, and trying all kinds of supplements, we have refined our supplement intake to include what we consider to be the essentials, which we show you in Table 1-1. People have different needs, of course, but the following is a short list of supplements almost everyone can benefit from. Remember to adjust the amounts up or down slightly, depending on whether you have a good diet or nutrient-poor diet. These aren't the only supplements we ever take or recommend, but they are

a good, safe, and user-friendly way to start a healthy supplement program. If you have been using supplements for a while and are now taking dozens because they all sounded so good, try cutting back to the essentials for a month or so, and then add a few specifics based on your needs.

Table 1-1	The Essential Supplements
Multivitamin-mineral-everything supplement	2 to 4 tablets daily; you can take them just once in the morning with breakfast
Vitamin E	400 to 800 IUs
Vitamin C	1 to 2 grams
Calcium/Magnesium or bone-building supplement (with 400 IUs vitamin D, silica (no RDA), and 2 to 3 mg boron)	1,200 mg/600 mg
Grape seed extract (antioxidant booster)	200 to 400 mg
Fresh-ground flaxseed (bowel of regulator, fatty acid source)	1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon, or 4 capsules high lignan flaxseed oil

If you want to supercharge your system with nature's cleanser and blood-builder, chlorophyll (as well as minerals, vitamins, enzymes, and other healthy factors), add one of what we call the super green foods daily: spirulina, chlorella, blue-green algae, barley grass powder, or wheat grass powder. One teaspoon in a little juice or a banana-protein powder smoothie does the trick. See Chapter 9 for more information on these super green foods and Appendix A for mail-order companies who sell them.