

A FITTER PILL TO SWALLOW?

Vitamin and mineral supplements are now a part of millions of people's dietary habits, but do we really need them to stay healthy?

Story by **Nat Barnes**



It seems ironic that while governments around the world are spending billions fighting illegal drug taking, millions of people are popping pills as part of their daily routine.

The tablets that those millions are taking aren't illegal, however. Instead they're dietary supplements including vitamins and minerals, which those who take them believe will ensure a healthier life. Dietary supplements have now become big business – in excess of US\$600m in many Western countries – and there are even claims that some can cure illnesses, such as cancer or heart disease, in larger doses.

Celebrities aren't immune to the promises of these tablets either. Actress Hilary Swank is reckoned to take almost 50 of them a day, from aloe vera to immune system boosters, while US rapper 50 Cent is about to introduce his own range of dietary supplements.

But do we really need dietary supplements, or can their benefits be found in a healthy diet alone? Here we examine five of the most popular supplements on the market, look at their benefits and ask top nutritionist Susannah Lawson if you can get the same results without reaching for a pot of pills. ▶

VITAMIN C

There's no doubt that Vitamin C is easily one of the most popular dietary supplements taken around the world. With a healthy diet of fresh fruit and vegetables, you might also think that it's one of the easiest to ditch too, but according to Susannah Lawson you'd be wrong.

'Levels of Vitamin C in fruit and vegetables are highest after they've just been picked and when eaten raw or lightly steamed', she explains. 'If you're eating them in a varied diet and they've either been grown by yourself or locally, then you might not need a Vitamin C supplement, though I think it's always worth it to help stave off infections.'

'The problem comes with supermarket fruit and vegetables that have been in cold storage, which can drastically reduce their levels of Vitamin C. One study by the Institute for Optimum Nutrition [in the UK] found that Vitamin C levels in individual oranges varied between 60mg and nothing, so it can make a big difference.'

'Anyone taking it should also remember that Vitamin C is water soluble so only stays in your system for about six hours. That means that if you think you're coming down with a cold or infection, it's no good just taking one big dose once a day. A smaller dose of 500mg three times a day is far better and will give you the best chance to fight it off.'



IRON

Iron is another popular and well-known supplement, but Lawson warns against taking iron without being recommended to do so by a healthcare professional.

'We generally have a lot of iron in our diets already and it's only really recommended for those at risk of anaemia or for post-menopausal women. Iron in food is also very different from the iron in supplements, so again it's best not to take it in isolation,' she says.

Found in red meat, nuts, prunes, green leafy vegetables, seeds and dates, your iron absorption is also enhanced by Vitamin C, so combining, say, a glass of orange juice with an iron-rich food will help.



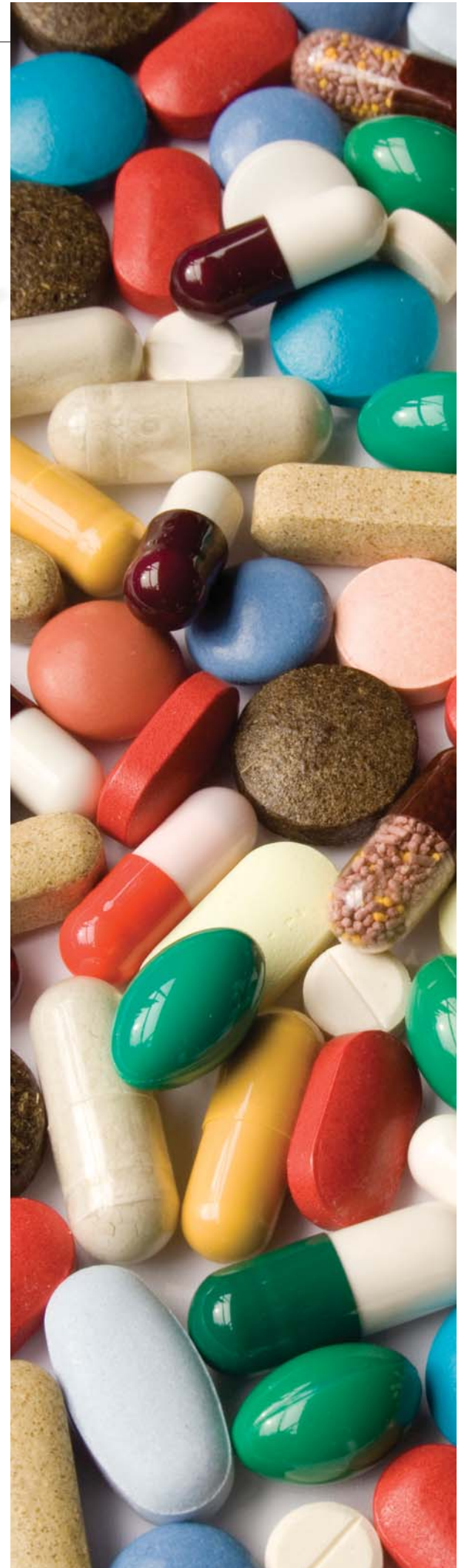
The great shake debate

Join any gym and, whether you're doing weights or not, the chances are that conversations will eventually turn to the fashionable subject of protein shakes.

Highly popular with those who do regular weight training, protein shakes allow you to raise your regular intake of protein (usually found naturally in meat, fish, eggs and pulses) in order to build more muscle. Protein is one of the main dietary ingredients for your body to build muscle and frequent weight trainers find it difficult to eat enough in a normal diet to get the results they want. But, like the dietary supplements, do they really need the shakes or can a balanced diet provide all they need?

'There's no doubt that protein supplements work as professional bodybuilders have been using them for years,' explains personal trainer Ryan Norton. 'However, whether the average gym-goer or weight-trainer needs to take them is another matter. Are they taking it to save time or simply because they're too lazy to cook a healthy, balanced meal for themselves?'

'The facts are that if you want to build muscle, then you need to eat as much protein as possible, but the reality is that you don't need as much as the manufacturers of these shakes might have you believe. Unless you're seriously into bodybuilding, then you should aim for a healthy diet and leave the shakes on the shelf.'





OMEGA-3

Like Vitamin C, Omega-3 fish oils are another supplement that has become increasingly popular in recent years. In some countries it is even added to such products as milk and margarine, but generally Omega-3 is found in oily fish such as sardines, anchovies and small mackerel. As with the other supplements here, if your diet is already rich in these, then you shouldn't need to consider taking Omega-3 supplements.



So why is Omega-3 so good for you? Aside from aiding the health of your brain and your overall mood, Omega-3 is reckoned to be very good for pregnant women, because its essential fats are beneficial to a baby's brain development while in the womb.

'Although recommended for pregnant women, it's important to look for fish from the least polluted sources, so organic fish rather than farmed if possible and also smaller fish such as sardines or pilchards rather than tuna or swordfish,' says Lawson. 'Any industrial pollutants are stored in the fat cells of fish, so the smaller the fish, the less pollution it will contain. If you don't like oily fish, then go for the most easily absorbable purified supplements.'

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CALCIUM

'The diets of most people are generally very calcium-rich, so it's rare that I'll see anyone in my clinic who has a calcium deficiency,' says Lawson. Despite that, though, calcium is crucial to your diet to help build healthy bones and teeth – any long-term deficiency can lead to poor blood clotting and even osteoporosis.

With calcium evident in dairy products such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, green leafy vegetables including broccoli, as well as seaweeds, nuts, seeds and the likes of tahini, it's not difficult to find either. Even those avoiding dairy products for ethical or dietary reasons shouldn't have too many problems incorporating it into their diets.



'If you do feel that you're low in calcium, it's worth remembering that nutrients don't work in isolation and to build healthy bones you also need magnesium, zinc and manganese among others, in which case it's probably best to take a multivitamin and mineral supplement,' continues Lawson.

VITAMIN E

Perhaps the most controversial supplement of our group here, the studies and facts surrounding Vitamin E are extremely confusing. Found in foods such as sunflower seeds, peanuts, sesame seeds, sardines, sweet potatoes, wheatgerm and peas, Vitamin E has been thought of for many years as one of the best supplements for fighting heart disease. Its other benefits include helping to keep skin soft and supple, reducing the ageing process and speeding up the healing of wounds.



However, evidence has recently emerged that Vitamin E can actually hinder rather than help those taking it if combined with statin drugs for high cholesterol. 'If your diet already includes lots of nuts and seeds, then the chances are that you don't need a further Vitamin E supplement,' explains Lawson. 'Having said that, though, if you're unwell or at an increased risk of disease, then it might be worth taking an antioxidant supplement with Co-enzyme Q10 that also includes Vitamin E.' ●

NOTE: Before taking any kind of dietary supplement, you should consult your doctor, a professional dietician or nutritionist.