

The 411 on Vitamins

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), vitamins and minerals, also known as micronutrients, are critical for healthy development, disease prevention, and well-being – and they are mainly consumed through food or supplements.

A survey conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of the American Osteopathic Association found that more than four out of five American adults take over-the-counter vitamins or supplements. Taking a daily vitamin of some sort may feel beneficial for our health, but it is also important to make sure you are not overconsuming them.

“Some vitamins are water soluble, and some are fat soluble. If you take too much of any water soluble vitamins like B-12 and vitamin C, your kidneys will excrete it and you will urinate it out. For some fat soluble vitamins, if you take too much your body will hold onto it and that can affect your chemical balance, electrolytes, and calcium balance. So you don’t want to just take a ton of those,” says Anne Orzechowski, APRN, an OSF HealthCare family medicine nurse practitioner.

Vitamins A, D, E, and K are considered to be fat-soluble, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Because fat-soluble vitamins are stored in the body as opposed to eliminating any excess amounts, these are the ones that have a higher risk of vitamin toxicity.

A fat-soluble vitamin that tends to be widely overconsumed is vitamin D. In fact, earlier this year, a man in the UK made headlines around the world when he ended up hospitalized due to vitamin D toxicity. The reason for this overconsumption, as well as overconsumption of other over-the-counter supplements, is because many people do not realize that they are also consuming these nutrients in the foods they eat. Supplements are only truly needed if you are deficient in any particular vitamin.

When it comes to vitamin D, Orzechowski says that a blood test is needed to know if you are deficient or not.

“You really are not going to have signs that you are deficient in vitamin D, so you are really not going to know. We care about it when you get older or when you are of post-menopausal age because it is important for your bones and avoiding osteoporosis. So you may not notice if you are deficient in vitamin D,” Orzechowski explains.

In addition to sunlight, foods that contain vitamin D include certain fish, orange juice, dairy and plant milks, egg yolks, and some cereals. Other essential vitamins come from foods such as fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts, and meat.

To really know what your body might be lacking, or to know if you really need to increase your daily dose of vitamins or not, Orzechowski recommends talking with your primary care provider about any concerns you have.

Symptoms that may indicate a true vitamin deficiency – such as fatigue, hair loss, poor vision, restless legs, constipation, bruising easily, and muscle cramps – have a tendency to fly under the radar.

“We tend to just feel how we feel and are used to it, so if we are a little fatigued we just kind of plow through the day. But I think it’s a great idea to get your labs drawn once a year to check if you’re anemic, make sure your electrolytes are fine, check your liver and kidneys, make sure your blood sugar is at a good level, and make sure your vitamin D is not super low. So I think just getting your blood drawn once a year is a really beneficial way to be proactive about your health – and then we can kind of talk and see what supplements you might be interested in and which ones can really benefit you,” advises Orzechowski.

Most importantly, eating a healthy diet and listening to your body is key, as there is no “one size fits all” answer to knowing whether or not you might need to make a trip to your local store to stock up on vitamin supplements.

“The jury is still out. There are a few that are not recommended, but one that probably won’t hurt or harm you is just a multivitamin because not everybody eats seven to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day. That’s one that you can generally take and feel good about,” Orzechowski says.

Make an appointment with your primary care provider if you are concerned, or have questions about your vitamin intake. If you do not have a primary care provider, find one at www.osfhealthcare.org