



Many people often have the misconception that they can stay healthy by taking health supplements. Although the term - health supplements seems to suggest that they are meant to 'supplement' what is lacking in our body to keep us healthy, this is a misnomer.

Health Supplements

- How Much Is Enough?

Staying healthy requires more than just popping pills. A healthy lifestyle that includes regular exercise, having a balanced diet and sufficient rest is the way to a healthy body. We therefore cannot expect to stay healthy just by taking health supplements.

Health supplements in general can be divided into two broad categories - dietary and herbal supplements (vitamins, vitamin-enriched food and herbal remedies). Our daily intake should meet the recommended daily allowance (RDA) that our body requires to perform the metabolic functions. Most of the RDAs can be met by observing a balanced diet.

The table below shows the RDA of vitamins for adults (25 - 50 years old) as well as the effects of deficiency and excess dosage.

Vitamins (Strength)	Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA)		Effects of Deficiency	Effects of Excess Dosage
	Male	Female		
A (i.u)	5000	4000	<i>Xerophthalmia</i> - dryness of the eye (conjunctiva & cornea).	Fatigue, irritability, anorexia, loss of weight, hair loss, anaemia, enlarged liver & spleen.
B1 (mg)	1.5	1.1	<i>Beri beri</i> - a deficiency disease marked by inflammatory/degenerative changes of the nerves, digestive system and heart.	Sensory nerve degeneration.
B2 (mg)	1.7	1.3	Not applicable	
B3 (mg)	19	15	<i>Pellagra</i> - a disease marked by dermatitis (inflammation of the skin), gastrointestinal disorders, mental disturbances & memory loss.	
B6 (mg)	2.0	1.6	<i>Neuropathy</i> - degeneration of the nerves.	
B12 (mcg)	2.0	2.0	<i>Pernicious anaemia</i> - a form of anaemia that results when the bone marrow fails to produce adequate numbers of red blood cells.	
C (mg)	60	60	<i>Scurvy</i> - a disease characterised by spongy gums, loosening of the teeth & bleeding into the skin & mucous membranes.	Diarrhoea & development of renal stones.
D (i.u)	400	400	Not applicable	<i>Hypercalcemia</i> (the presence of an excess of calcium in the blood), muscle weakness, anorexia, headache, nausea, vomiting & bone pain.
E (i.u)	15	12	Not applicable	Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, fatigue, weakness & blood thinning.
K (mcg)	80	65	Not applicable	Not applicable
Folic Acid (mcg)	400	400	Not applicable	Not applicable

Things To Bear In Mind When Taking Supplements...

- Requirements differ with age, body size, genetic makeup and physiological state of the individual (eg. growth rate, state of pregnancy or lactation etc).
- It is important to differentiate between taking vitamins for supplementation as opposed to treating deficiency states, where higher doses are needed.
- Fat soluble vitamins (eg. A, D, E and K) stay in the body for a longer period of time than water soluble ones (eg. B1, B2, B3, B6, B12 and C).
- Both vitamins and herbal remedies can have significant interactions with prescription medicines. They may reduce the effect of the medicines prescribed. Always inform your doctor or a pharmacist about the type of health supplements you are taking or seek their advice before consuming them.
- Be proactive and diligent in seeking information on the supplements you are planning to take. If in doubt, always check with your pharmacist or doctor.

More information on health supplements can be obtained from www.consumerlabs.com, www.quackwatch.com or the National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements, USA. Locally, you can approach the Health Sciences Authority, Singapore.