

The Right Supplement – How to pick a decent multivitamin

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Published originally in *Living Without Magazine* - April/May 2013

If you have food sensitivities and reactions, you may not be absorbing nutrients optimally. Nutrition experts consistently advise eating a variety of plant-based and minimally processed foods but a well-rounded diet is only as good as what is absorbed.

A recent study following doctors over 11 years found an 8 percent reduction in overall cancer rates in those who took a regular vitamin and mineral supplement. This makes multivitamins one of the cheapest, simplest ways to lower cancer risk.

Deciding to take a daily supplement of vitamins and minerals is the easy part. The challenge is selecting the right supplement among the hundreds of choices. To start, it helps to understand the basic characteristics of multiple vitamin and mineral supplements. They are differentiated by their potency, target population, ingredient sources and delivery.

Potency in a supplement is measured against a government standard called the Daily Value (DV). DV is used on food and supplement labels so that consumers can determine what percentage of a nutrient is in one serving compared to what a person might need to consume in a day to avoid developing deficiency symptoms. The DV was never meant to be an optimal nutrient goal or the maximum level of a nutrient consumed. It is simply a general standard that reflects what most people need so they don't become deficient. In other words: DV is a low bar.

Multiple vitamins are either low or high potency. Low potency supplements contain 100 percent or lower of the DV for vitamins. Minerals (except zinc) are rarely sold in high potencies as they can build up in the body. Water-soluble B vitamins are often found in high potencies in multiples; they are non-toxic and simply enrich the urine when taken beyond what's needed.

Gluten-Free Examples: Jarrow Multi 1 to 3 is high potency. One A Day Essential High Potency Multiple Vitamin is, ironically, low potency.

Target Population is the consumer or condition for which the multiple was designed. Common examples are supplements labeled for a specific gender or age group, such as men's, women's or age 40+ supplements. Others have a specific focus, such as eye health or blood sugar control.

When the condition is stated or implied in the name, deciding whether you are the target consumer is straightforward. Twinlab Allergy MultiCaps, for example, clearly indicates the formula is geared for people with sensitivities and allergies.

Other multiples are indirectly targeted by whether or not they contain iron. Men and post-menopausal women should not take iron unless otherwise advised by a medical professional, as it can build up in the body and increase risk of heart disease. The multiple used by the doctors in the cancer study (mentioned above) did not contain iron as study participants were all males age 50 and over.

Gluten-Free Examples: Both Solaray Once Daily Multi-Vita-Min and Thorne Basic Nutrients are available with and without iron.

Ingredient Sources are some combination of food-derived, laboratory-grown and/or synthetic compounds. Classically, multiple vitamins and minerals were made from food concentrates/extracts, minerals and/or synthesized vitamins. All food-based supplements used to be low potency because truckloads of food would have been needed to produce high-potency vitamins. Now nutrients can be grown in the laboratory and concentrated in higher potencies. "Laboratory grown" is a sophisticated process where vitamins and minerals are cultivated in and then harvested from yeast.

Gluten-Free Lab-Grown Examples: Megafood Vegan Daily and Pure Encapsulations PureFood Nutrients contain nutrients mostly derived from yeast.

Lab-made vitamins are still widely used but minerals cannot be created synthetically (yet). They are distinguished by what they are bound to and, consequently, how they are absorbed. Calcium is never listed as just calcium but as calcium carbonate, calcium citrate or calcium something else. These carrier substances have different properties. Calcium citrate is one of the best-absorbed forms of calcium but it is bulky, which increases the number of pills needed to get a sufficient dose. In contrast, calcium carbonate, which isn't as well absorbed, is dense; thus more can fit into fewer pills.

In recent years, the trend is for supplement companies to use natural food concentrates or plant extracts in their multiples versus only synthesized vitamins. This is because some of the most important nutrients in addition to vitamins and minerals, are compounds called phytonutrients.

Phytonutrients are substances found in plants with health-promoting properties. For example, blueberries contain phytonutrients (anthocyanins, proanthocyanidins and resveratrol). Studies have shown that phytonutrients inhibit cancer cells and improve cognition and memory.

Gluten-Free Examples: American Health More Than A Multiple, Country Life Beyond Food and Nature's Way Alive Multiple Vitamin contain a combination of manmade vitamins and natural phytonutrients.

Delivery is the final consideration. There are capsules, soft gels, pressed pills, liquids and powders. The delivery form is clearly delineated but you may have to read the label more carefully for specifics. For example, capsules are typically made from gelatin, a beef by-product, but now some companies use vegetarian-friendly cellulose instead. If the bottle does not state "vegetarian capsules," check the ingredient list for cellulose vs. gelatin. (All soft gels are gelatin based.)

The delivery form is always labeled but the size and shape of pills is not always obvious if the bottle is dark or opaque. More ingredients, especially minerals and food concentrates, mean consuming more and/or bigger pills to get the amounts listed on the bottle. To squeeze an optimal amount of nutrients into a food-based supplement, many companies have introduced powdered drink mixes as an alternative (or in addition) to the daily multivitamin.

Gluten-Free Examples: Amazing Grass Superfood Drink Powder and Kyolic Kyo-Green Energy Powdered Drink are powdered drink supplements.

Fortunately, there's a wide range of multiple vitamin and mineral supplements available on the market today. Hone in on the perfect fit by looking at the potency, ingredient sourcing, target population and delivery form. Once you characterize these, read through the ingredient list to determine how well the product suits you. Need help? Work with a knowledgeable healthcare professional.

Sidebar in article: Phytonutrients – even the most humble fruits and vegetables are replete with phytochemicals-chemical substances made by plants that affect their taste, color, scent and other properties. The searing bite of hot peppers, the pungent whiff of garlic, the deep orange hue of carrots, and the red blush on tomatoes all owe a tip of the hat to different phytochemicals – in these instances, capsaicin, organosulfur compounds and the carotenoids alpha carotene and lycopene. Spices, oils, wine, tea, and other plant-derived foods and beverages also contain a variety of phytochemicals, including flavonoids. Although plants develop phytochemicals partly as a defense against predators, some of these substances appear to be beneficial for people. Experts believe these substances might explain the many health benefits of eating fruits and vegetables and perhaps nuts, whole grains, vegetable oils and even dark chocolate (cocoa). Source: The Truth about Vitamins and Minerals, www.health.harvard.edu

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