THINKING OF TAKING FOOD SUPPLEMENTS?

If your kitchen cupboards contain an alphabet of vitamin and mineral supplements, you are not alone. On the island of Ireland, one in four of us is taking food supplements, often to make up for what we feel is a lack in our normal diet, or because we feel generally run down, or to help ward off colds in the winter. But can they really make a difference? This guide to food supplements will answer most of your questions.

Your guide from safefood
In collaboration with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland.

For more information on food supplements and the new EU legislation, check out the following resources or call the safefood helpline.

safefood  www.safefood.eu
Food Safety Authority of Ireland  www.fsai.ie
The Food Standards Agency  www.food.gov.uk

*To find a dietician or registered nutritionist see the following websites
Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute  www.indi.ie
British Dietetic Association  www.bda.uk.com
The Nutrition Society  www.nutritionsociety.org
Will supplements make up for not eating well?
Taking supplements will not correct a poor diet. We get a lot more from foods than just one or two vitamins or minerals; we also get energy, protein, fibre and other natural compounds that can have beneficial effects on our health. It’s the combination of nutrients working together in food that keeps us healthy.

Do I need to give my child food supplements?
Some babies and children can benefit from taking a food supplement. Your own health professional is the only one who can advise for your baby and child. If he/she advises you to supplement your baby or child’s diet, use a product that is specifically designed for their age group. Because babies and children are smaller than adults it is much easier to take unsafe amounts.

Get advice before taking a supplement
Most people who take food supplements don’t check first with their doctor or a dietitian. If you are thinking about trying a supplement, here are a couple of important points to bear in mind:

Don’t mix food supplements and medicines
Some food supplements can interact with medicines. So if you are taking any medication, seek advice from either a GP or dietitian.

Do eat a healthy, balanced diet
Eat a variety of foods, including wholegrains, fruit and vegetables, lean meat and fish. Eat only small amounts of sugary and fatty foods such as chocolate, biscuits and crisps.

How do I know that what I am taking is safe?
The European Union has introduced new rules to help ensure food supplements are safe and properly labelled. Only certain nutrients may be used in food supplements and these may only be used in amounts that do not pose a health risk. Maximum safe levels for some supplements have yet to be set.

What’s on the label?
The label must show clearly:
• What the ingredients are
• How much to take, and how often
• The amount of each nutrient in a supplement, expressed as a percentage of RDA (the recommended daily allowance for an adult)
• A statement that the supplement is not designed to replace a healthy, balanced diet.
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Do watch out for unreasonable health claims
If a claim seems too good to be true then it probably is. It will take time for the new rules to remove all claims which are not backed up by science. Contact the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (ROI) or the Food Standards Agency (NI) if you have concerns.

Don’t mix food supplements and medicines
Some food supplements can interact with medicines. So if you are taking any medication, seek advice from either a GP or dietitian.

Do eat a healthy, balanced diet
Eat a variety of foods, including wholegrains, fruit and vegetables, lean meat and fish. Eat only small amounts of sugary and fatty foods such as chocolate, biscuits and crisps.

Don’t take more than the recommended daily dose
Taking too much of a supplement can be harmful, or even toxic. If the manufacturer recommends just one a day, two are unlikely to be any better for you, and may even be harmful.

Food Supplements – What are they and what do they do?
Food supplements are concentrated sources of nutrients taken as a dietary top-up. They include fish oils, which have been shown to benefit heart health, minerals like iron to help prevent anaemia, and a whole list of vitamins, from A to K. Supplements contain higher amounts of nutrients than are found in most foods.

Why do people take food supplements?
All women of childbearing age (and who are sexually active) should take a 400µg folic acid supplement daily to prevent birth defects, such as spina bifida, in the baby. Many pregnancies are unplanned so it is important that women take folic acid even if they are using contraceptives.

In certain circumstances your doctor may advise you to take a food supplement e.g. supplements may be needed for fragile bones and sometimes older people may have difficulty absorbing the nutrients they need from food and need to take extra in supplement form.

Generally, you do not need to take food supplements if you are healthy and eat a normal balanced diet. That means a diet which contains a variety of foods, including starchy foods (preferably wholegrain), fruit and vegetables, low-fat dairy foods, lean meat and fish. Too much of certain supplements can be harmful and cause unwanted side effects.

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