



Advice to Women About Supplements

The use of dietary supplements is a common health practice in the United States and other developed nations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, dietary supplement use is more common among women than men, and the likelihood of use increases with age. While a food first approach to getting nutrients in the body is encouraged, supplementation becomes essential for women dealing with issues such as: preconception, pregnancy and lactation, postmenopausal aging, health conditions, inadequate diet, medications that interfere with nutrient bioavailability, and a specific health goal.

Women fall into three general age groups that dictate nutrient intake to avoid deficiency: 1). premenopausal, menstruating adolescents and women, 2). pregnant and lactating women, 3). postmenopausal women.

Nutrients for Premenopausal, Menstruating Women Include

Iron: Since iron is lost during menstruation, this is one of the most important nutrients for this life stage. A crucial component of hemoglobin, iron reversibly binds to oxygen which the red blood cells deliver to all body tissues. Iron intakes below the recommended 18 mg per day means diminished oxygen delivery, which interferes with normal organ function.

Vitamin D3: Vitamin D plays many important roles in the body, including building and maintaining strong bones and protecting against certain cancers and other diseases. The American Cancer Society does not recommend relying on sun exposure to meet daily needs.

Folate (folic acid) and Vitamin B12: As with iron, folate and vitamin B12 help to form red blood cells (RBCs) and protect against anemia. Folate and vitamin B12 deficiency result in the production of unusually large RBCs with shortened life spans.

Nutrients for Pregnant, Lactating Women

Nutrition plays a huge role in the health of both mother and baby during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Increased amounts of nutrients are needed to build the placenta, nourish the developing child, and ensure that the mother continues to receive adequate nutrition to stay strong and healthy. Recommended nutrients in prenatal and lactating supplements include:

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Folate (folic acid): The most important nutrient during pregnancy due to its role in supporting proper brain and nervous system development in the baby and helping to prevent neural tube defects.

Choline: Research shows that choline is a critical nutrient during pregnancy for processes such as brain and tissue development. Most pregnant women in the United States are not getting enough choline and would benefit from boosting their intake through supplementation to obtain the recommended 450 mg per day.

Magnesium: Magnesium assists with hundreds of reactions and processes in the body, and is needed in higher amounts during pregnancy, about 360 mg per day.

Vitamin K: Vitamin K works alongside calcium, vitamin D, and vitamin A to activate the use of calcium in our bodies in the right places like our bones. Vitamin K also plays an important role in blood clotting. Research shows that vitamin K deficiency during pregnancy may lead to vitamin K deficiency bleeding, a bleeding disorder in young infants that manifests in hemorrhaging inside the brain soon after birth.

Vitamin D3 and calcium: A pregnant and lactating woman provides the main source of vitamin D for her infant, so having enough to give is crucial. The National Institutes of Health recommends a minimum of 15 μg (600 IU) for vitamin D and 1,000 mg of calcium per day during these life stages.

Iron: Iron needs increase from 18 to 27 mg per day during pregnancy to provide for mother and baby.

Iodine: Iodine is important for proper thyroid function. Pregnant women need at least 220 μg per day and 290 μg per day during lactation.

Selenium: As with iodine, selenium is required to activate thyroid hormones. According to the American Thyroid Association, selenium supplementation during pregnancy may reduce the risk of thyroid function abnormalities in the mother after birth.

Zinc: Pregnancy causes rapid cell growth in mother and baby, which requires zinc and increases daily needs. Zinc deficiency during pregnancy can lead to complications, including difficulties during labor, low birth weight, and premature delivery, so getting the recommended 11 mg per day for pregnancy and 12 mg per day for lactation is essential.

Omega-3 fatty acid: Pregnant and lactating women should consider taking supplemental EPA and DHA that research shows is critical for brain, eye, immune, and nervous system development in a growing fetus. Research shows lactating women need 1,000 mg of DHA per day to reach the recommended concentration in their breast milk to best support their infant.

Nutrients for Postmenopausal (50+) Women

Like other life stages, increased amounts of specific nutrients are needed for older women to protect against age-related diseases. Older adults also tend to have smaller appetites and decreased nutrient absorption, further warranting supplementation.

Calcium: Calcium absorption declines with age, which, in part, is why calcium needs increase by 200 mg per day for at least a total of 1,200 mg per day for women over age 50.

Vitamin D3: Older adults typically have low vitamin D levels, as they spend most of their time indoors and have decreased intake of foods high in vitamin D due to decreased appetites and decreased variety of foods in their diets. Postmenopausal women should get at least 600 IU of vitamin D per day.

Vitamin E: This is an antioxidant that helps with skin conditions that can occur with aging, such as adult acne, eczema, and rosacea.

Vitamin A: Vitamin A works with vitamin E for skin health. It also supports eye health and can help prevent and treat macular degeneration and other age-related eye diseases.

Zinc & Selenium: These minerals support strong immune function, which is essential since older adults may be more prone to illness from weakened immune systems.