Supplements vs. Healthy Diets: Which Is Better for You?

Eating a variety of foods and getting enough to drink can help you stay healthy. Foods contain nutrients like protein, carbs, fats, fiber, and water, as well as various vitamins and minerals that can keep you healthy. Your body uses all of these to keep your muscles, bones, organs, and other tissues healthy and strong. But getting all the nutrients you need is sometimes difficult, and supplements can be an easy way to add nutrients to your diet.

Eating a mix of nutritious foods can also reduce your risk for many diseases, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Supplements typically come in the form of pills, powders, or beverages. They usually add vitamins, minerals, protein, fiber, or other nutrients to your diet. Some, such as multivitamins or complete nutrition shakes, may provide a combination of nutrients.

So how can you make sure you're getting all the nutrients you need?

Benefits of a Healthy Diet

Experts recommend that healthy people get their vitamins and minerals by eating nutrient-rich foods instead of taking supplements. Few studies show a clear link between taking supplements and preventing disease – unless those diseases are caused by a nutritional deficiency.

If you're in good health, you're better off getting as many of your daily nutrients from food as you can, because the vitamins and minerals in foods are often easier for the body

to absorb.

Benefits of Supplements

Although it's good if you can get most of your vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients from food, this isn't always possible. Busy caregivers may not have the time to make healthy meals or may be caring for someone with little or no appetite.

Supplements or fortified foods can help provide nutrients that you or your loved one might be missing, especially if you have:

- Crohn's disease, celiac disease, or irritable bowel syndrome
- Osteoporosis
- Age-related macular degeneration

To find out if someone might benefit from supplements or fortified foods, ask yourself or your loved one these questions:

- Do you eat fewer than two meals a day?
- Is your diet restricted? For example, do you not eat meat or dairy, or do you eat fewer than five servings of fruit and vegetables every day?
- Do you eat most of your meals alone?
- Have you gained or lost more than 10 pounds in the last 6 months without trying to?
- Do you take three or more medications a day?
- Do you have three or more alcoholic drinks a day?
- Are you pregnant?
- Are you in menopause or postmenopausal?

If you answered "yes" to any of the questions, then

supplements might help you maintain a healthy diet.

Risks of Supplements

Never start taking a supplement without talking to your doctor first. Some vitamins and minerals may be harmful in large amounts. Supplements are not tested by the Food and Drug Administration, and they can contain hidden ingredients or drugs that you don't know about.

Some supplements can interact with medications. Anyone with a condition like diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease should get a doctor's OK before taking a supplement.

Your doctor can tell you which nutrients you may need more of. They can also tell you how much and the form or source you should take. Calcium, for example, comes in many forms from different sources. Depending on your needs, your doctor may recommend that you take a specific type or that you take it in combination with magnesium or vitamin D.

With the right guidance and support, you can be sure you are maintaining a healthy diet and getting all the nutrients you need.