

Dietary Supplements for Cancer Survivors



This fact sheet is one in a series developed for cancer survivors who have finished active treatment. Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight may help lower the chances of some cancers returning and improve overall health.

Should I take dietary supplements?

Many people who have been diagnosed with cancer wonder whether they should take dietary supplements – such as vitamins, minerals or herbs – to optimise their health. They may wish to regain control over their life so consider taking supplements to ensure the cancer does not return.

The general rule is that dietary supplements should not replace whole foods, which are the best source of vitamins and minerals. However, if you aren't managing to eat a balanced diet, it is best to talk to a dietitian or your doctor about whether you need a supplement. See the fact sheet *Guide to Healthy Eating* for more information about good food choices.

What are the benefits of supplements?

If your body shows signs that it is not getting enough nutrients, or if you consistently can't get the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of vitamins and minerals from your diet, then supplements may help.

For example, if you do not eat meat or you are always tired, you may need an iron supplement. If you are at risk of osteoporosis (brittle bones) you may be advised to take a calcium supplement.

Ideally you only need to take supplements for a short time, but a dietitian or doctor will tell you the best course of treatment. A dietitian can also advise you how to increase your vitamin and mineral intake through food.

How are supplements taken?

Most supplements are in tablet- or capsule-form but some come in powders that are mixed with water or juice. Some supplements are oil-based and can be taken as liquid or in capsules. Your dietitian can suggest the best type of supplement to take for your situation.

Are there any disadvantages of taking vitamin or mineral supplements?

Like many things, it's best to take supplements – if you need them – in moderation. See the *Question checklist* overleaf for questions to ask your dietitian about taking supplements safely.

- Supplements can cost a lot over time, so if you take them without really needing them, this is wasted money.
- If your body does not need water-soluble vitamins (C and B vitamins), it will flush out the excess in your urine.
- The vitamins A, D, E and K can build up and be stored for long periods in the body. An excess can lead to side effects.
- Some minerals can also be harmful in high doses.

Are herbal remedies useful?

You may be curious about whether herbal supplements are worth taking to improve your general health.

Some herbs have been studied scientifically and have evidence to back up their uses. For example, ginger may help to relieve nausea and senna is a documented laxative. However, it is important to know that all herbs need to be taken with care and some can interact with other medications.



Some people believe that high-dose vitamin supplements help strengthen the body's immune system. There is little scientific evidence to support these claims.



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For example, scientific evidence backs up the use of St John's wort to help relieve mild to moderate depression, but it is also known to reduce the effectiveness of some types of chemotherapy and the hormone therapy tamoxifen.

If you are considering using herbal medicine or taking herbal supplements, talk to your dietitian or doctor beforehand.

What about anti-cancer supplements?

You may have heard or read about supplements or diets that are said to cure cancer or stop it from returning. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Talk to your dietitian or doctor about these types of supplements so you can make an informed decision about whether to try them or not.

- **Laetrile** – known as amygdalin or vitamin B17 – is not a real vitamin but an extract from apricot kernels. In the past, it has been widely promoted as a cancer therapy. However, scientific studies have shown that it is converted into the poison cyanide in the body. While this does kill cancer cells, it also kills healthy cells and has been known to cause cyanide poisoning.
- **Shark cartilage** – has been promoted as a cancer cure because of the myth that sharks don't get cancer. Studies by well-known research institutions have tested whether shark cartilage does show any benefit, but there is no scientific evidence to support its effectiveness.

This fact sheet provides general information only and is not a substitute for individual health advice. You should talk to your doctor or dietitian about your specific situation.

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Where can I get more information?

If you are considering taking a dietary supplement, a useful reference is the website of the US-based Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center – www.mskcc.org. The section *About Herbs, Botanicals and Other Products* includes uses, scientific evidence and warnings for a range of dietary supplements.

tip

The booklets *Living Well After Cancer* and *Understanding Complementary Therapies* have more information about nutrition. Call **Cancer Council 13 11 20** for copies.

Question checklist

Your dietitian can also provide you with information about food and dietary supplements. You may find the following questions a good starting point:

- When should I consider taking a supplement?
- How will I know if the supplement is working?
- How often should I take it? Can I take it long term?
- Are there any special instructions, such as taking it only in the morning or with food?
- Are there any foods or other supplements I should take when I'm on this supplement?
- Are there any foods or supplements I should avoid, or other precautions I should be aware of?
- What foods can I eat to help me get this nutrient? What quantities should I eat to get the recommended daily allowance?



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