



Nutrition Nibbles

Are You Supplement Savvy?

Vitamin C, flaxseed oil, calcium, emergen-c, fish oil, glucosamine, echinacea...the sea of supplements is endless and popular. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2006, more than 50% of Americans were taking a supplement. The most popular, regularly taken supplement remains the multivitamin-mineral complex, closely followed by calcium and vitamin D. Interestingly, at least 70% of Americans take a supplement on occasion (Council for Responsible Nutrition, 2001). Do you supplement your diet with a vitamin, mineral, herb, or botanical?

A **supplement** is defined as "a product taken orally that contains one or more ingredients (as vitamins or amino acids) that are intended to supplement one's diet and are not considered food (Merriam-Webster)." The top two reasons cited for taking a supplement are to improve or to maintain health. Interestingly, very few people take dietary supplements based on a healthcare provider's recommendation. In this down economy, many consumers are turning to supplements in an effort to self-treat and avoid costly visits to the doctor.

With supplement formulations aimed at heart health, improving

eyesight, soothing sore joints and fighting off the flu, how do you find a safe, effective supplement? The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is charged with monitoring the supplement market. Due to the fact that supplements are considered additions to the diet and not medical drugs, supplements are not required to undergo testing for safety or efficacy before hitting the market or your cupboard shelf. This means that pill you're swallowing in hopes of improving your health may be ineffective at best and unsafe at worst.

When scouting out supplements:

- 1. Look for the USP Seal of Approval.** This seal means that what is listed on the label is contained in the pill, has been manufactured safely, and will breakdown in the body as desired.
- 2. Don't believe all the health claims listed on the bottle.** Remember, supplements don't need to prove their function or efficacy before going to the marketplace. While it is NOT legal to market a dietary supplement product as a treatment or cure for a specific disease or to alleviate the symptoms of a disease, the FDA does not generally get involved with supplements until after the product is already on the market.

College Corner: Is it an Airborne Emergen-C?

Students living in close quarters mean a higher incidence of colds and flu. In fact, it is not unusual for college students to get 3-4 colds per school year! When the sniffles start, it may be tempting to turn to mega-dose mixes of vitamins, minerals, herbs, and electrolytes added to water, a.k.a. Airborne or Emergen-C supplements. Do these effervescent tablets and powders do the trick? Are they considered safe?

The Claims

Airborne states it supports immune function. Interestingly, Airborne settled a \$30 million law suit for originally promoting their product as a cold and flu cure and preventer. The original version of Emergen-C boasts immune enhancement, increased metabolic function, and increased energy without the use of caffeine.

Research Says

Unfortunately, no credible research has been conducted on either supplement. Both supplements contain nutrients that may be helpful in immune function but can be obtained through a healthy,

Questions or Comments? Email me at marymahoneyrd@gmail.com

Supplement Savvy continued...

3. "Natural" supplements are not necessarily safe or wholesome. Unfortunately, the FDA has not developed a definition for the term "natural." After market is usually the FDA's first opportunity to take action against a product that presents a significant or unreasonable risk of illness or injury, or that is otherwise adulterated or misbranded. Supplements can negatively interact with prescription medications, certain health conditions, and healing after surgery.

Before taking any dietary supplement, ask yourself these questions:

- What are the potential health benefits of this particular supplement?
- What will this supplement do to enhance my life?
- Does this product have any safety risks?
- What is the proper dose to take?
- How, when, and for how long should I take it?
- Does this supplement carry the USP Seal?

If you cannot answer even one of these questions, do not take the supplement!

In my research for this article, I found that supplement users tend to lead healthier lifestyles. According to *The Journal of Nutrition*, supplement users tend to:

- Be women
 - Be more educated
 - Have a lower Body Mass Index (BMI)
 - Not smoke
 - Be more physically active
- Even more fascinating to me as a dietitian, supplement users

generally have better diets, higher in micronutrient-rich foods (vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants), higher in fiber, lower in fat, and lower in alcohol. These findings beg the question: do supplement users even need to take supplements at all? Fortunately, we can obtain all the nutrients our bodies need for optimal functioning from a healthy, varied, well-balanced diet. I believe nutritious eating is a safer route to improved health over supplement use.

The Skinny on Supplements:

- Supplements are products intended to be taken in addition to a healthy diet, not as a replacement for.
- Consumers need to be careful. Supplement safety can be variable.
- Supplement users tend to have healthier lifestyles. Consider adding more nutrient-rich foods to your diet rather than taking a supplement.

What Does It Mean?

Vitamin = organic compounds found in food that are needed in small quantities to support normal human growth and health (ex. vitamin C)

Mineral = inorganic compounds needed continuously in the diet to support health, growth, and reproduction (ex. calcium)

Botanical = a medicinal preparation made from part of a plant (roots, bark, leaves) (ex. chamomile tea)

Herb = a plant or plant derivative or extract used for health, healing, or in the kitchen; a subset of botanicals (ex. mint)

Airborne and Emergen-C continued...

well-balanced diet. This highlights a common thread in the nutrition world: isolating and consuming single nutrients (such as vitamin C or zinc) do not tend to provide desired results. Nutrients found naturally in food work synergistically together to deliver an abundance of health benefits.

Potential Disadvantages

But are these fizzy mixes harmful? Potentially. For instance, high vitamin A intake may weaken bones and cause birth defects and taking large amounts of vitamin B6 (>250 mg/day) may result in nerve damage. Both supplements contain high doses of vitamin A and B6 plus large amounts of vitamin C that along with effervescence may cause stomach upset. Excess vitamin C consumption can lead to increased oxalate and urate excretion, which can produce kidney stones. Ouch!

The Bottom Line

When faced with the cold or flu, you are better off eating a healthy diet, rich in fruits and vegetables, along with drinking plenty of water, and taking a nap.

