

Vitamin and Dietary Supplements During Cancer Therapy

If you have any questions, please ask your physician.

Your cancer therapy may include chemotherapy, targeted therapy or immunotherapy. This handout will tell you about using vitamins and dietary supplements during cancer therapy.

Some people going through cancer therapy use vitamins and dietary supplements because:

- Their healthcare clinician advises them to do so.
- They take advice from nonmedical professionals.
- They see ads that falsely claim the product can cure or prevent certain cancers.
- They believe that vitamins and supplements are “natural,” needed by the body, and can only help their health.

It is important to know vitamins and dietary supplements are **not approved** by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Therefore, a product may or may not have the amount of ingredients it claims to have on the label. Some may have very little of the main ingredient. Others may have much higher and possibly unsafe amounts or unknown ingredients.

For most people, a healthy diet gives them all the nutrition they need. People receiving cancer treatment and on clinical trials need to be very careful about taking supplements and extra vitamins. Taking too much of a vitamin, or eating or drinking a certain ingredient in a dietary supplement can interact with the treatment. They may cause bad effects, such as:

- Reducing how well the cancer therapy works
- Causing toxic levels of the cancer therapy to build up in the body

Adding vitamins and supplements to your diet

Before you add any vitamins or supplements to your daily routine, follow this checklist.

Research your options.

It is important to know the basics about these products before you add them into your routine. Any time you put something into your body, there is a risk of having harmful side effects.

- Learn about the possible effects of the product.
- Know the benefit or function you expect to get from the product.

If you know the risks and benefits, you are better prepared to talk about the pros and cons with your clinician.

Do not take large amounts of the vitamin or supplement (also known as mega-doses). These can be harmful. Follow your clinicians instructions.

Talk with your clinician.

Before taking a new vitamin or supplement, talk with your treatment team.

- Mention the possible benefits and side effects that you found.
- Ask if the product will interfere with your treatment, other supplements or medications you are already taking.

As cancer clinical trials usually have rules on what you can and cannot take, make sure you check with your clinician before taking a new vitamin, supplement or over-the-counter product.

Review your diet.

Many nutrient-rich foods offer similar health benefits as supplements. Check the foods in your diet. You can see what vitamins and nutrients you may already be eating. Keep safe doses and dietary restrictions in mind.

Ask your oncologist about meeting with a dietitian to talk about your nutrition needs during cancer treatment.

Check your daily routine.

In addition to your diet, you can get the effects of many supplements through other lifestyle changes. For example, if you are able, exercise to help your cognitive memory, energy and mood. Also, improving your sleeping habits and drinking more water are important to your health and well-being.

Search for quality indicators.

Some vitamin and supplement brands closely follow an organization's quality standards or programs to make sure they have the ingredients listed on the label in the declared potency and amounts. They also follow the FDA Current Good Manufacturing Practices to make sure there is even quality from batch to batch.

Look for a quality seal on the bottle for reputable organizations such as U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP), ConsumerLab (CL) or National Science Foundation International (NSF):



ConsumerLab (CL)



National Science Foundation
International (NSF)

Remember

Before adding vitamins and supplements into your routine:

- Think about your alternatives such as diet, exercise, sleep habits and drinking more water.
- Talk with your clinician about your choices because they may affect your treatment.

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