

Medshield: Understanding vitamins and minerals as we grow older

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As we grow older, our nutritional needs change. An ageing metabolism, age-related health conditions and lifestyle choices affect how our bodies age. Vitamins and minerals are vital in supporting our bodies and could help address health risks associated with ageing.



Supermarkets and pharmacy shelves are stocked with a wide range of supplements to support our health needs and make it easy to rely more on vitamin and mineral supplements than a healthy diet. However, a healthy balanced diet should be enough to help your body naturally absorb the necessary nutrients.

If you are concerned about vitamin or mineral deficiencies, consult your GP, dietician or healthcare practitioner for an assessment. They will recommend a tailored treatment plan to improve your body's vitamin or mineral levels if necessary.

While it is always best to consult a healthcare professional for personalised advice, knowing that your nutritional needs change as you age is essential. As you age, your body may lose its ability to absorb vitamin B12, vitamin D, calcium, magnesium, Omega-3 fatty acids, potassium and antioxidants. These are all vitamins and minerals essential to helping your body stay healthy and could help manage age-related health risks.

Let's look at why these are important and some popular food sources you can turn to:

- **Vitamin B12** is essential for nerve function and red blood cell production. Our bodies' ability to absorb vitamin B12 from food decreases as we age. Good sources of vitamin B12 include meat, fish, eggs and fortified foods or supplements. Adults between 30 and 50 should receive about 2.4 micrograms daily.
- **Vitamin D** is vital for bone health, muscle function and immune system support. With ageing, our bodies may lose their natural ability to synthesise vitamin D from sunlight. Including food sources rich in vitamin D in our diet is essential. These include fatty fish, fortified dairy products and supplements. Adults over the age of 30 should receive 15 micrograms a day.

- **Calcium** is crucial for maintaining strong bones and teeth. It also plays a vital role in blood clotting. It helps our muscles to contract and regulates normal heart rhythms and nerve functions. Interestingly, 99% of our body's calcium is stored in our bones, with the remaining 1% found in our blood, muscles and tissue. When the body runs low on calcium, it 'borrows' calcium from our bones and replaces it again. Sometimes, this does not happen, and it could lead to medical problems. Good calcium food sources include dairy, leafy greens, almonds, edamame beans, canned sardines or salmon (with bones). Adults over 30 to 50 should receive 1,000 milligrams of calcium a day.
- **Magnesium** is involved in various bodily functions, including nerve and muscle function, bone health and blood pressure regulation. Nuts, seeds, whole grains, legumes and leafy greens are good food sources. The recommended daily intake for adults between 30 and 50 years is 320 milligrams for women and 420 milligrams for men.
- **Omega-3 fatty acids** are healthy fats associated with heart health, cognitive function and help to reduce inflammation in our bodies. Good food sources include fatty fish like salmon, sardines, flaxseeds, chia seeds, and walnuts. Many studies recommend that adults between 30 and 50 receive 1.1 grams for women and 1.6 grams for men.
- **Potassium** helps to maintain healthy blood pressure and is involved in heart and muscle function. Good food sources include bananas, oranges, sweet potatoes, leafy greens and beans. Adults over 30 must receive 2,600 milligrams (women) and 3,400 milligrams (men).
- **Antioxidants** include **vitamins A, C and E, selenium and zinc**. Antioxidants help to protect cells from damage caused by free radicals and could help to prevent the risk of chronic diseases. Good sources include fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and whole grains. Adults over the age of 30 should receive the following amounts of vitamins A, C and E, selenium and zinc a day:
 - Vitamin A: 700 micrograms (women) and 900 micrograms (men)
 - Vitamin C: 75 milligrams (women) and 90 milligrams (men)
 - Vitamin E: 15 milligrams (women and men)
 - Selenium: 55 micrograms (women and men)
 - Zinc: 8 milligrams (women) and 11 milligrams (men)
- **Don't forget fibre:** Adequate fibre intake is essential for digestive health and can help prevent constipation, a common issue for older adults. Good sources of fibre include whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts. Adults over 30 to 50 must consume 30g of fibre a day.

Remember that individual needs may vary based on overall health, medications and specific dietary restrictions. It is always recommended to consult a healthcare professional or registered dietitian for personalised advice tailored to your particular needs.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies and your medical aid

[Medshield Medical Scheme](#) recommends consulting a healthcare professional to help identify any vitamin or mineral deficiencies and to investigate if an underlying cause could be present. Funds from the Medical Savings Account (MSA) will cover treatment for the deficiency subject to your chosen medical aid plan containing the MSA benefit, unless the diagnosis is considered a Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB).

Early detection of a vitamin or mineral deficiency is critical to help manage any health-related risks. Management of the deficit depends on the severity of the underlying cause. Treatment usually involves dietary changes with supplements recommended by your healthcare professional. In some cases, intravenous therapy may be necessary.

Overcoming any vitamin or mineral deficiency takes time. Your healthcare professional will help you develop a plan to manage and improve the deficiency levels. It is essential to know that it will take time and that you must be patient with yourself and the healing process.

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