

MeritCare Medical Center
Aunt Cathy's Guide:

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My Current Top Five Easy Ways to Improve Your Family's Nutrition (subject to change at any moment! ☺)



Aunt Cathy

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This is a quick summary of some things in the nutrition news that can make a big difference in people's health. Although references are not provided in this brief version, all the suggestions are based on reports in the legitimate scientific literature and the references are available on my more thorough papers that are also on this website (see page 10.) The recommendations are not based on goofy things found on the internet. When "researching" a topic on the internet, it is important to consider the reliability of the source. After all, there is no law against fiction in America! People can pretty much print anything. For example, websites that end in .edu (colleges and universities) tend to be more reliable than sites designed primarily to sell you something. And of course, none of the following suggestions are intended to take the place of the advice of your health care provider.

1. **Eat lots of brightly colored fruits and vegetables.** There are many beneficial phytochemicals (plant chemicals) that have been found to have a potentially protective role against a variety of common health problems such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, MS, birth defects, and macular degeneration (a form of blindness.) Some of them act as protective "antioxidants," but they have many other benefits as well.

Some of the beneficial substances are actually the pigments that give the plants their color. Some examples are: lutein in green leafy vegetables, lycopene in tomatoes and watermelon, beta-carotene in peaches and carrots, anthocyanin in blueberries and beets and zeaxanthin in corn. It turns out that white is a color too, in terms of phytochemicals. Apples for example, have quercetin, a flavonol phytochemical with a number of potentially beneficial effects.

An example of other beneficial substances in fruits and vegetables is sulforaphane in broccoli, which appears to decrease risk of colon cancer especially. Compared with meats, and high fat dairy foods, they are much lower in fat and calories. We tend to eat way too little of these terrific foods, and it hurts us.

To get the best of all of them, eat a wide variety of fruits and vegetables of many colors, and aim for 9 servings a day (an amount that has been shown to be beneficial in some studies.) Some expert groups suggest even more. My official recommendation is **"Eat all the brightly colored vegetables and fruits that you can get your hands on!"**

Nine servings seems like a lot to most folks, since many people eat very few. In fact, the french fry is the most commonly eaten vegetable in America. Hmmm. Not an ideal pattern. Start by adding a couple servings and working up. Throw some chopped green pepper and dried tomatoes on the pizza. Keep those ready-to-eat baby carrots on hand. Make it EASY for us to grab the healthier snack as we run out the door.

Canned, frozen or fresh fruits and vegetables all count because the brightly colored antioxidants are not destroyed by heat! If you use canned veggies, watch out for the salt they often can them with. Choose low sodium versions, or at least rinse them off. This is not an issue with fruits, or with frozen veggies except if they are packed in some kind of sauce. Remember that color is a big deal, so choosing only iceberg lettuce won't provide the dark green lutein found more generously in romaine or spinach. Color variety is key.

Check out "Aunt Cathy's Ideas for Trying to Eat More of Those Terrific Antioxidant Phytochemicals . . . and Liking It" for ideas for adding them to our diet. This and many other nutrition topics are available at meritcare.com, including any mentioned throughout this paper as having more information on a topic.

Information on how to find them is included at the end of this paper.

The dark leafy veggies are also terrific sources of **vitamin K**, a nutrient just now being recognized as critical to decrease risk of osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, kidney stones, liver and colon cancer and arthritis. It is also a nutrient found to be low in the diets of many Americans. It appears that the elderly need more than the current RDA of 90-120 mcg/day. This information is so new that vitamin K is not even included in most multivitamins currently on the market, and many health professionals will not yet have heard about these new issues.

[Vitamin K: The coagulation vitamin that became omnipotent. *Thromb Haemost.* 2007 Jul;98(1):120-5.]

If you are taking medications to prevent blood clots, be sure to show this information to your doctor before adding a lot of vegetables to your diet.

New research on the relationship between vitamin K and these drugs will result in changes in how we do things. But because the information in support of these changes is very new, it will also be new to many healthcare providers, so I have put a "Vitamin K" handout on line that includes all the scientific references and detail that your doctor will want to see before making any changes in diet or medication. Your doctor can also contact me for the most recent reports on this topic.

2. **When you eat grains, try to use whole grain whenever possible.** The "germ" (the part that becomes the baby plant) and the bran (the fibrous coating) of grains are removed in processing when grains are "refined." These are the parts that would have contributed the most magnesium, chromium, vitamin E, fiber and many other nutrients. Magnesium and chromium have important roles in using the rest of the grain (the starchy part) for energy and for avoiding diabetes.

Large national studies (such as NHANES by the National Center for Disease Control in Atlanta) have shown that the majority of Americans have a diet too low in these minerals.

This inadequacy contributes to weight problems, diabetes, heart disease and some neurologic problems that are too common in our society.

“Enriched” grain products have only a few nutrients replaced (vitamins B1, B2, B3, and iron) out of all the nutrients that are removed when refining grain. This label can be confusing because the word “enriched” sounds like something was made to be even better. Instead, it means “not as nutritious as whole grain.” If you don’t like whole grain bread and pasta, you can still add back the nutrients they contain by adding wheat germ and bran to other foods. Check out “Aunt Cathy’s Industrial Strength ‘Instant’ Oatmeal Recipe” for some ideas.

- 3. Nuts, seeds, peanuts and dried beans/peas are terrific nutrient-rich foods because they are essentially the germ of new plants.** For example, in one study from Harvard, eating an ounce of nuts or peanuts four times a week or more was shown to be related to 25% less likelihood of developing diabetes. This appears to be associated with the generous magnesium in these foods. They also have more “satiety value” – you feel like you actually ATE something” -- and they are terrific nutritious snacks including for people who are watching their weight or who have diabetes.

Although all fats have about 9 calories per gram, the forms of fat in nuts and peanuts (mostly “monounsaturated” and “omega-3” fats) are less contributory to heart disease than many other forms of fat. Also they are rich in nutrient content so they are not an “empty calorie” food. So, although they do have calories, I think of these forms of fat as potentially “Dangerous to your butt, but not to your heart!” Additionally, dried beans and peas are also very low in fat and high in fiber. It looks like that means chili beans, lima beans, split peas, chick peas, navy beans, lentils, pinto beans, etc., are “health foods!”

These foods, and assuring adequacy of magnesium (and chromium, another key mineral in the same foods) in general, are especially beneficial for people who appear to be genetically (or for whatever reason) at greater risk of developing diabetes. This includes people who have family members with diabetes, people who are overweight, and some ethnic groups who appear to be disproportionately at risk.

For example, serious health problems related to diabetes have been found to be causing much more injury to Native Americans and African Americans than to some other groups of folks. There are many contributing factors, of course, but assuring adequacy of magnesium and chromium (another key mineral in the same foods) is one factor that can be easily corrected if people just hear about it. [Vitamin D is another, as discussed later.]

- 4. Another important form of fat to include in our diet is called “omega-3” fat.** A lot of research shows that it is associated with a decreased risk of cancer, heart disease, inflammatory disease, depression, pregnancy problems, and much more. We Americans tend to eat too much of another family of fat called omega-6 fat, such as that found in corn oil. To improve the balance in the American diet, **flax, canola and walnuts** are great plant sources of omega-3 fat.

Additionally, there is a huge amount of research showing that the special forms of omega-3 fats found in **fish and fish-oil supplements (EPA and DHA)** have certain very important advantages for many people. EPA decreases inflammation in a wide range of inflammatory diseases like MS, cardiovascular disease and arthritis. I think of **EPA** (whose real name is **eicosapentaenoic acid**) should be thought of as “**Environmental Protection Agency**” instead, because it seems to be very protective against a number of health problems.

DHA in particular appears to be very important for the development of the brain and the retina of the eye, so it is critical during pregnancy and infancy. It has also been shown to be helpful in the continued good operation of the brain (e.g. in possibly helping to ward off age-related problems like alzheimers and other forms of dementia,) and for decreased risk of, or progression of, depression, blindness due to macular degeneration, attention deficit disorder and Parkinson’s disease.

More research is ALWAYS needed, of course, but the cumulative results of a great many studies have been in the same direction. Assuring an adequate intake of these fats looks like a VERY good idea. **Additionally, it is now recognized that for some people it is difficult to efficiently convert the plant omega-3 oils (like those in canola, flax and walnuts) into the important EPA and DHA oils that are found ready-made in the fish oil.** This may be a factor in a broad range of inflammatory conditions and critical in pregnancy.

The American Heart Association recommends 1000 mg of fish oil for most people with risk of heart disease. People at risk include those who smoke, who have disturbed blood lipids (too much LDL cholesterol or triglycerides, or too little HDL cholesterol,) who are overweight or sedentary, or who have high blood pressure, diabetes, or a family history of heart disease. Other factors contribute to heart disease risk as well.

[Omega-3 fatty acids and coronary heart disease risk: Clinical and mechanistic perspectives. Atherosclerosis. 2007 Dec 24 n-3 Fatty Acids: Recommendations for Therapeutics and Prevention. Proceedings of a symposium, New York, New York, USA, May 21, 2005. [Am J Clin Nutr.](#) 2006 Jun;83(6 Suppl):1451S-1538S.]

Saturated fats have long been on our list of “foods to eat less of.” These include lard/meat fat, butter/dairy fat, and “hydrogenated” (solidified) oils like shortening or margarine. None of these is a good source of omega-3 fat. Eating less of them and choosing foods that are more generous in their omega-3 fat content is a very good idea.

Some shortenings and margarines accidentally contain “**trans**” fat, another “good-to-avoid” form of fat that must be shown on the nutrition labels of foods if there is more than ½ gram per serving. It is usually in food because the oil was “partially hydrogenated” to make it solid at room temperature like margarine or shortening. It is gradually being removed from our food supply because it is quite unhealthy. The biggest source at present is in baked goods made with shortening. Some margarines and shortenings are now made that have no trans fat in them, and they usually note this on the label because it is such a good thing.

5. **Increase your regular intake of vitamin D to assure an intake that averages at least 1000 iu per day (for some folks 2000) and take a multivitamin with minerals daily in addition to “eating right.”** This is a markedly different recommendation because new research shows that older recommendations of 200-400 iu of vitamin D were simply **too low to assure adequacy**. Some researchers have found that even 1000 iu may be too little for some people in terms of optimizing health and minimizing disease risks, especially among people with dark skin or who live up north. In certain situations, 2000 iu appears to be needed. (More on that later.) **In the northern third of the country vitamin D deficiency is now being described as “an unrecognized epidemic.”** [See map on p. 12]

It is now known that **inadequate vitamin D status is very common**, and that it is associated with **increased risk of diabetes, lupus, scleroderma, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, cancer of the breast, colon, prostate, endometrium and pancreas, heart disease, muscle pain, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, obesity and muscle weakness**.

Other associations of inadequate vitamin D are now beginning to be explored such as increased risk of parkinsons disease, autism, asthma, impairment of the immune system, pre-eclampsia and cancer of the lung. This is not surprising because it has now been recognized that vitamin D actually functions as a key steroid hormone -- one that your body would make as needed ... if you just give it enough of the material to do the job. **Over 200 different body tissues have been identified so far that have receptors for the vitamin D hormone, and they need it in order to work properly.**

[Vitamin D and type 2 diabetes Is there a link? Prim Care Diabetes. 2009 Apr 21. Hypovitaminosis D is Associated with Greater Body Mass Index and Disease Activity in Pediatric Systemic Lupus Erythematosus. J Pediatr. 2009 May 14. Vitamin D status and muscle function in post-menarchal adolescent girls. J Clin Endocrinol Metab. 2009 Feb;94(2):559-63. 25. Vitamin D Supplementation and Reduced Risk of Preeclampsia in Nulliparous Women. Epidemiology. 2009 May 15. Association of 25-Hydroxyvitamin D With Blood Pressure in Predominantly 25-Hydroxyvitamin D Deficient Hispanic and African Americans. Am J Hypertens. 2009 May 14. Effect of vitamin D supplementation in the institutionalized elderly. J Bone Miner Metab. 2009 May 15. Hypovitaminosis D in obese children and adolescents: relationship with adiposity, insulin sensitivity, ethnicity, and season. Metabolism. 2008 Feb;57(2):183-91. 25-Hydroxyvitamin D and Risk of Myocardial Infarction in Men A Prospective Study *Arch Intern Med*. 2008;168(11):1174-1180. Diagnosis and treatment of vitamin D deficiency. Expert Opin Pharmacother. 2008 Jan;9(1):107-118. Vitamin D in Health and Disease. Clin J Am Soc Nephrol. 2008 Jun 4.]

Another emerging area of research is the role of vitamin D inadequacy as a factor in heart disease. Cardiovascular disease is the most common cause of death in the US, so this is a very important issue. In a “meta-analysis” (looking at data of many studies at once) published recently the risk for mortality (death) from all causes was found to be significantly less among people taking an ordinary dose of a vitamin D supplement compared with those who did not. Another prospective study concluded that a low vitamin D level in the blood was associated with a higher risk of death from all causes, and specifically with heart attack as well.

[Independent association of low serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D and 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D levels with all-cause and cardiovascular mortality. *Arch Intern Med*. 2008;168(12):1340-1349. Vitamin D and cardiovascular disease risk. *Curr Opin Clin Nutr Metab Care*. 2008 Jan;11(1):7-12. Macro- and micronutrients in patients with congestive heart failure, particularly African-Americans. *Vasc Health Risk Manag*. 2007;3(5):743-7. Vitamin D supplementation & total mortality: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Arch Intern Med*. 2007 10;167(16):1730-7]

Can we make adequate vitamin D in our skin?

We can make adequate vitamin D in our skin, but only

1. if we live where the angle of the sun is more directly overhead (i.e. not up north,)
2. if we are not covered up with clothes or sunscreen most of the time,
3. if our skin is not old or darkly pigmented,
4. if we do not take anti-seizure medications and
5. if we are not severely overweight.

Even at the equator there are many reports of people being found to have serious vitamin D deficiency simply because they are covered up much of the time. Some are covered up for religious reasons, some to prevent skin cancer (melanoma) and some of us are just covered up as a public service! ☺ We all need to be sure to get adequate vitamin D some other way. People who work nights also need to think about this. It is estimated that about 50% of the earth's population is at risk of vitamin D deficiency.

[Sunlight, UV-radiation, vitamin D and skin cancer: how much sunlight do we need? Adv Exp Med Biol. 2008;624:1-15. Vitamin D deficiency: a worldwide problem with health consequences. Am J Clin Nutr. 2008 Apr;87(4):1080S-6S.]

Did you know that the men at greatest risk of prostate cancer are older African-American men living in the north? African-American women living in the north also have a higher incidence of breast cancer, which appears to also be associated with low vitamin D status. Many researchers believe that we can lower the risk by correcting the inadequacy of vitamin D that is so common among people up north and among people of color.

For example, recently blood tests evaluating the ACTUAL vitamin D status of **African-American mothers and their newborns in Pittsburgh found that over half in each group was vitamin D deficient, even if prenatal vitamins were regularly used.** This has many very serious implications, but it could be remedied by more generous supplementation of this key vitamin. Attention to this is long overdue. **About a third of white mothers and babies in the same northern study were also found to be deficient.**

In another new report it was found that a daily intake of 2000 iu of vitamin D assured that dark-skinned northern women maintained a desirable blood level of greater than 50 ng/ml. Another study found that 2000 iu daily could raise the storage form of vitamin D in blood to 52 ng/ml, a level associated with reduction by 50% in incidence of breast cancer in observational studies. Ironically, 2000 iu daily had long been set as the presumed upper level of safety for vitamin D intake. **Many experts have expressed the opinion that the upper level of safety should be changed to a chronic intake of 10,000 iu daily.**

What serum (blood) levels of vitamin D are associated with good health?

A recent report found evidence suggesting that higher vitamin D intakes beyond current recommendations may be associated with better health outcomes. The looked at a number of studies related to bone mineral density (BMD), lower extremity function, dental health, risk of falls, admission to nursing homes, fractures, cancer prevention and hypertension (high blood pressure.)

Their conclusion: “For all endpoints, **the most advantageous serum levels for 25(OH)D appeared to be at least 75 nmol/l (30 ng/ml) and for cancer prevention, desirable 25(OH)D levels are between 90-120 nmol/l (36-48 ng/ml). An intake of no less than 1000 IU (25 mcg) of vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol) per day for all adults may bring at least 50% of the population up to 75 nmol/l. Thus, higher doses of vitamin D are needed to bring most individuals into the desired range.** While estimates suggest that 2000 IU vitamin D3 per day may successfully and safely achieve this goal, the implications of 2000 IU or higher doses for the total adult population need to be addressed in future studies.”

[Optimal serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D levels for multiple health outcomes. Adv Exp Med Biol. 2008;624:55-71.]

[Diagnosis and treatment of vitamin D deficiency. Expert Opin Pharmacother. 2008 Jan;9(1):107-118. Prevalence of vitamin D deficiency among healthy infants and toddlers. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2008;162(6):505-512 Hypovitaminosis D among healthy children in the United States. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2008;162(6):513-519. Neonatal vitamin D status at birth at latitude 32 degrees 72': evidence of deficiency. J Perinatol. 2007 Sep;27(9):568-71. Dose response to vitamin D supplementation among postmenopausal African American women. Am J Clin Nutr. 2007 Dec;86(6):1657-62. The urgent need to recommend an intake of vitamin D that is effective. Am J Clin Nutr. 2007 Mar;85(3):649-50. Vitamin D and prevention of breast cancer: pooled analysis. J Steroid Biochem Mol Biol. 2007;103(3-5):708-11]

Clearly a lot more research is needed ... it is ALWAYS needed ...but these new reports are a great illustration of the emerging broad importance of this issue. **The 1000 iu level is safe in general and the 2000 iu level is safe (and may be necessary) in some cases . . . what is clearly NOT safe is allowing a person to have a low vitamin D level.**

[Vitamin D Status: Measurement, Interpretation, and Clinical Application. Ann Epidemiol. 2008 Mar 8. Sunlight, UV-radiation, vitamin D and skin cancer: how much sunlight do we need? Adv Exp Med Biol. 2008;624:1-15. Vitamin D deficiency: a worldwide problem with health consequences. Am J Clin Nutr. 2008 Apr;87(4):1080S-6S.]

Taking in this amount of vitamin D will require using a supplement. The primary supplemented food in our diet is fortified milk with 100 iu/cup, but ten cups of milk is not reasonable, and it is also not good nutrition. One would have no room left for other foods. **Start with a regular multivitamin with minerals.** That provides 400 iu. If you drink a lot of milk, that combination may be adequate. Otherwise, you can easily add a tiny, easy-to-swallow inexpensive 400 –2000 iu vitamin D capsule, or a calcium supplement with a similar amount of vitamin D. There are even tiny 1000 iu “gummi”-type vitamin D products available.

Vitamin D can be stored well in the body, so some people prefer taking a week’s worth of extra vitamin D all on one day. **There are few foods naturally high in vitamin D – really just salmon, tuna and cod-liver oil – which are problem foods for many people.** We will begin to see more foods being supplemented now that the public is becoming aware of the problem. Some yogurt and cheese now have a little vitamin D added, and the calcium-fortified orange juices are now supplemented as well. Other foods will likely be fortified in the coming years. However, if you are in an at-risk group (e.g. dark skin, living up north, etc.) it is likely necessary to take an additional vitamin D supplement even if you do drink a lot of milk and take a multivitamin. Note also that milk “straight from the cow” does not contain any vitamin D, so some of our farm families get none and are quite unaware if it.

Some people are hesitant to take supplements for one reason or another. So, just for fun, I have put together four daily meal plans that would provide 1000-2000 iu various ways:

Four Daily Meal Plans that Would Provide 1000-2000 iu Vitamin D

Plan 1 -- The “I love milk plan”:

1 multivitamin	400 iu	
4 cups milk	400 iu	
1,000 iu vitamin D supplement	Total = 1800	

Plan 2 -- The “I hate milk and salmon plan”:

1 multivitamin	400 iu	
0 cups milk	0 iu	
1,000 vitamin D supplement	Total = 1400	

Plan 3 – The “I insist on getting my vitamin D only in the form of fortified foods and not from pills” plan:

0 vitamin supplements	0 iu	
4 oz daily salmon (110 iu/oz)	440 iu	
<u>10 cups</u> of milk (WHATTTT???)	Total = 1440	

Plan 4 – The “I insist on getting my vitamin D only in the form naturally occurring in the foods I eat and not from any fortification or pills” plan:

0 vitamin supplements	0 iu	
0 cups milk	0 iu	
14 oz daily salmon (110 iu/oz)	1540 iu	Total = 1540 iu

As you can see, one cannot realistically get there from here without supplementation.

Vitamin D Inadequacy in Breastfeeding Alert

Interestingly, mother’s milk is an amazingly nutritious food and breastfeeding is certainly encouraged. However, the milk does not contain vitamin D. This is probably because when people were invented nobody lived in Fargo. As an adaptation to live well up here, we need to have a furnace, a coat, really good mittens and vitamin D. It is that simple. Because of the finding of serious vitamin D deficiency in many breast-fed babies, in 2003 the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that breastfed babies be given “at least 200 iu of vitamin D by two months of age.” **In 2008 that recommendation was changed to 400 iu/day for all infants and they recommended starting it right away because many babies were actually born with inadequate stores of vitamin D because their mothers were deficient during pregnancy (in spite of taking prenatal vitamins.)** This change brings US recommendations in line with those of their Canadian colleagues who have recommended 400 iu for babies, and at least 800 iu for everyone else up there for several years now. Here are some details of the kind of research that led to this change in recommendation:

A recent study in Boston of 380 healthy infants and toddlers who were seen for a routine health visit found that the prevalence of vitamin D deficiency (≤ 20 ng/mL) was 12% (44 of 365 children), and 146 children (40%) had levels below an accepted optimal threshold (≥ 30 ng/mL.*)

[Prevalence of Vitamin D Deficiency Among Healthy Infants and Toddlers *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2008;162(6):505-512. Neonatal vitamin D status at birth at latitude 32 degrees 72': evidence of deficiency. *J Perinatol.* 2007 Sep;27(9):568-71.]

The same Boston authors studied the therapeutic amounts of vitamin D supplementation needed to correct the low vitamin D status of the children. They concluded that these two approaches were effective for bringing low vitamin D levels into the range of ≥ 30 ng/mL* within a 6 week treatment period:

Daily 2000 IU vitamin D2 or D3 or Weekly 50,000 IU vitamin D2

[Prevalence of Vitamin D Deficiency Among Healthy Infants and Toddlers *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2008;162(6):505-512.
Treatment of Hypovitaminosis D in Infants and Toddlers. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab.* 2008 Apr 15.]

*However, note that a report described earlier suggested that the healthiest ranges of serum vitamin D may in fact be above this “optimal threshold” of ≥ 30 ng/mL, and that it might be in the range of 36-48 ng/mL.

[Optimal serum 25- hydroxyvitamin D levels for multiple health outcomes. *Adv Exp Med Biol.* 2008;624:55-71.]

Take that multivitamin with minerals for other important reasons as well.

Besides the welcome 400 iu of vitamin D, multivitamins provide **follic acid and vitamin B12 in forms that are easier to absorb and use** by people taking certain common medications, those who have certain genetic traits, and people who experience some age-related changes in the stomach.

For example, some people take “proton pump inhibitor” medications (strong blockers of stomach acid production for heartburn or “gastro-esophageal reflux.”) They can be unable to obtain vitamin B12 from normal food sources because the process requires the presence of acid in the stomach. However, they CAN absorb the vitamin B12 in the vitamin pill form. Similarly, a third of the elderly are found to be vitamin B12 deficient when the most sensitive tests are used. That’s a lot of people! Often it happens for the same reason ...an age-related decreased production of stomach acid.

Both of these invisible vitamin B12 absorption situations can cause very serious health problems ... and both are prevented by simply taking a regular multivitamin! So, without having to know if you are personally at risk or a family member is at risk, the simple use of the multivitamin will prevent a number of serious problems. The problems to be avoided in this way include nerve damage, cancer, depression, stroke and birth defects.

However, some other causes of vitamin B12 deficiency will NOT be corrected just by the multivitamin (although people should still take one for other reasons, of course.) For example, the diabetes medication Metformin (Glucophage) also can also have a negative effect on vitamin B12 status. This is also true of a very serious vitamin B12 deficiency condition called “pernicious anemia.” These are both caused by factors other than the changes in stomach acid. Vitamin B12 issues with Metformin or pernicious anemia will need to be monitored and corrected by your health care provider, as the simple multivitamin will not solve those problems. (For more information on vitamin B12 issues and monitoring vitamin B12 status, please see my vitamin B12 handout.)

I do not sell anything. I just think that the evidence is quite clear that taking a multivitamin is a very good idea for everyone, and more and more professional health associations are of the same opinion. A low cost product is just fine, contrary to the claims of people who are trying to sell you a pricier “pyramid scheme” product.

Children’s chewable vitamins are very similar to adult products, and they can be very useful for people with trouble taking pills or who have concerns about the vitamin’s ability to dissolve and be well absorbed in the intestine. Most product labels say for ages under four give ½ tablet daily, and for ages four-through-adult, take a whole one daily. Read the label.

Note that many children’s and adult vitamins are not very complete. Some very popular products like some “gummi” vitamin products are actually quite incomplete and therefore not the best choice for a multivitamin. It is a good idea to pick a product that says “Complete” on the label (even though NONE of the vitamins on the market are actually complete.) The labels show that some products clearly provide nutrients that other products (including others by the same manufacturer) have left out. Some products will advertise some special feature to make them stand out in the crowd, and it is often an unimportant distinction. For the most part, just a complete-type generic is just fine, and much less costly.

Another nutrient problem that has recently been found to need more attention is IODINE DEFICIENCY. In many parts of the world (including the US --- see map on p. 12) iodine deficiency is common, and the traditional international approach to solving it has been to add iodine to salt. However, it appears that the amount obtained from iodized salt is actually not sufficient during pregnancy, and that even in areas that have been thought to have corrected iodine deficiency many women obtain too little.

Iodine deficiency is the number one cause of preventable mental retardation in the world. Iodine deficiency can also result in a serious lack of energy in anyone affected because it impairs the function of the thyroid gland. The World Health Organization is now increasing the recommendation for iodine intake, especially in pregnancy.



Back home in America, many people are unaware that they should select “iodized salt” ...the packaging is often very similar and they are side-by-side on the shelf at the store. Most specialty salts that are popular now, like sea salt or exotic salts, are also not iodized. Additionally, we frequently are advised to cut back on salt for other health reasons, which can further limit iodine intake. The choice of salt as the way to supplement iodine was made well before ideas of sodium restriction were common for health reasons.

Because it has long been assumed that the iodine deficiency problem was “solved” in the US, at present many vitamin pills contain no iodine at all, including many prenatal vitamins. So, this is one more nutrient that a person should check for when they select a multivitamin. Choose iodized salt if you use salt, and people who use little salt should be sure to find an iodine supplement especially if they live in the northern half of the country.

The problem of iodine deficiency has simply not been in our radar for many years. This is a very newly recognized and extremely important health problem that needs attention.

[Iodine Content of prenatal multivitamins in the United States. NEJM. 2009;360:939-940. Iodine deficiency in pregnancy and the effects of maternal iodine supplementation on the offspring: a review. Am J Clin Nutr. 2009 Feb;89(2):668S-72S. Iodine status of the U.S. population, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2003-2004. Thyroid. 2008 Nov;18(11):1207-14.]

And finally:

Of course, taking a multivitamin does not take the place of eating healthy foods.

Do I have to say this? For example, the vitamin pills contain no protein, no omega-3 fats, and little or no beneficial phytochemicals, potassium, magnesium, selenium, chromium, calcium, phosphorus, etc. The people who design the pills assume that taking a multivitamin does not take the place of eating healthy foods. It is up to us to eat more of the really great nutritious foods as described in this paper. For people who say that they “don’t believe in” taking a vitamin, I usually try to point out that nutrition is not a religion, so belief is not really a central issue. It’s a biological / biochemical science. At this time in history, the science indicates that it is advantageous to take a multivitamin, some fish oil, and for some folks additional vitamin D, vitamin K and iodine IN ADDITION TO eating lots of healthy nutritious foods.

Bottom line:

Eat lots of healthy foods including plenty of brightly colored fruits and vegetables, nuts, legumes, seeds and whole grains

AND

Take a multivitamin with minerals. Many people will also need extra vitamin D (some will need quite a bit more), vitamin K and iodine.

AND

For many people, for many reasons, fish oil supplements are advisable.

For additional information on these and other topics you can go to MeritCare’s website (www.meritcare.com) and find other articles in the “Aunt Cathy’s Guide to Nutrition” series.

Just type Cathy Breedon in the “search box” and a page comes up where you can click “Cathy Breedon’s Handouts.”

Topics there include information and references especially for people interested in:

Specific health problem issues as diabetes, celiac disease, cancer, eye health, multiple sclerosis, hemochromatosis, epidermolysis bullosa and the nutrition needs of children with several types of chronic health issues.

Pregnancy and infant nutrition issues

Nutrient-specific summaries providing much more detail about nutrients discussed here, such as magnesium, iron, chromium, iodine, vitamins D, K and B12 and different kinds of fat and oil.

MAPS of INTEREST: VITAMIN D and IODINE

Cathy Breedon

VITAMIN D:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsweek/images/latitude-vitaminD.jpg>

Except during the summer months, the skin makes little if any vitamin D from the sun at latitudes above 37 degrees north (in the United States, the shaded region in the map) or below 37 degrees south of the equator. People who live in these areas are at relatively greater risk for vitamin D deficiency.



(Actually, that's where I live ... but you can see why it's a really big deal Up North!)

IODINE: Map showing spatial correlation between the former "Goiter Belt*" in the northern U.S. and areas where the iodine content of drinking water is naturally low.

www.uwsp.edu/gEo/faculty/ozsvath/images/goiter_belt.htm

[*Goiter is an abnormal enlargement of the thyroid gland, often due to iodine deficiency.]

