

# Should You Be Taking Supplements?

Health writer **Diana Bocco** explores the use of vitamins in a well—or not so well—rounded diet.

**TO TAKE OR** not to take vitamin supplements? Seems like an easy choice, doesn't it? After all, what harm could there be in adding some supplements to your diet?

Plenty of harm, it seems, but only because people aren't using them properly.

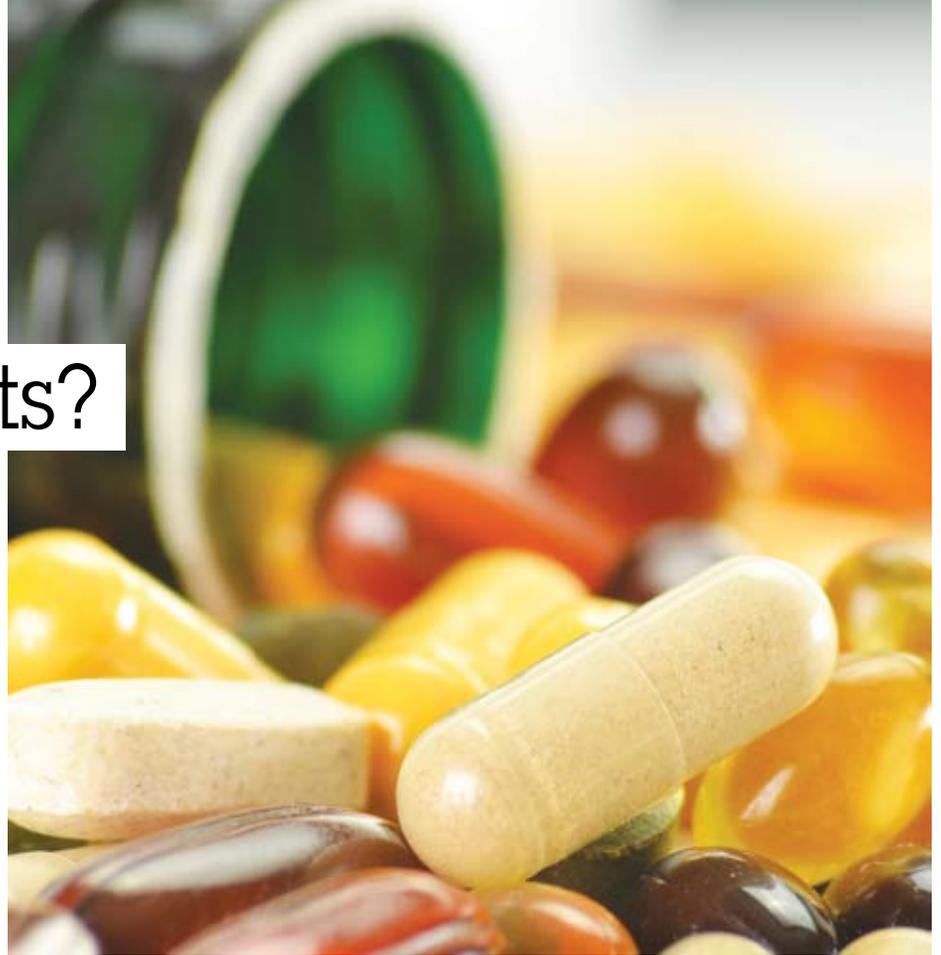
"Vitamin supplementation should *supplement* your nutrition, but your nutrition should come from your meals," says Dr. Michael J. Robb, DC, BA, AAS, a chiropractic physician in the metro-Phoenix area. "Nature's way of creating biochemistry cannot simply be substituted with vitamins."

## Toxicity

Vitamin toxicities are rare today, says Karlene Karst, RD, a registered dietician and co-author of *Healthy Fats for Life*. "The main ones to be concerned with are the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K," she says. Even then, excesses are rare.

"It's not that Americans take too many vitamins; it's that there's no direction," says Benjamin Gonzalez, MD, the medical director of the Atlantis Medical Wellness Center. Rather, Gonzalez believes the direction comes from marketing pushes and celebrity-sourced advice and not from well-trained nutritionists or physicians knowledgeable in diet supplementation.

Quality control is another serious issue, Gonzalez adds, explaining that there are well-documented cases of high levels of lead and selenium found in multivitamin formulas, all because of poor quality control. "It's difficult to know what is quality and what is not in over-the-counter vitamins," he says. Buying your vitamins based on what's cheaper is a sure way to end up with poor-quality nutrients.



## Poor Diet and Vitamins

Because most people don't meet even the minimum standards of a balanced diet, it's good nutritional insurance to take a moderate-dose, well-rounded multivitamin to fill in the gaps, according to Karst. Also, some nutrients are difficult to get in optimal amounts from diet alone.

"For example, vegetarians who don't eat seafood have no source of omega-3 DHA, which is important for mood, mind, memory, and more," says Elizabeth Somer, M.A., R.D., a registered dietitian and the author of *Eat Your Way to Happiness*. A sustainable, algae-based DHA supplement is their only option. Somer adds that vegetarians may also be missing other key nutrients in their diet, such as vitamin B12.

Somer adds that women of childbearing age should take a multivitamin to ensure that they get enough folic acid, a B vitamin that lowers birth-defect risk. Folic acid works its magic in the first few weeks after conception, before a woman knows she is pregnant. "By the time the pregnancy test comes back positive and she considers taking a folic acid supplement, it could be too late," Somer says.

## What Americans Are Missing

About 99 out of 100 Americans don't meet even minimal standards for a balanced diet, according to FDA data. And, according to Karst, Americans are particularly low in vitamin D, mainly because outside of milk (which many adults don't drink), vitamin D isn't as widely

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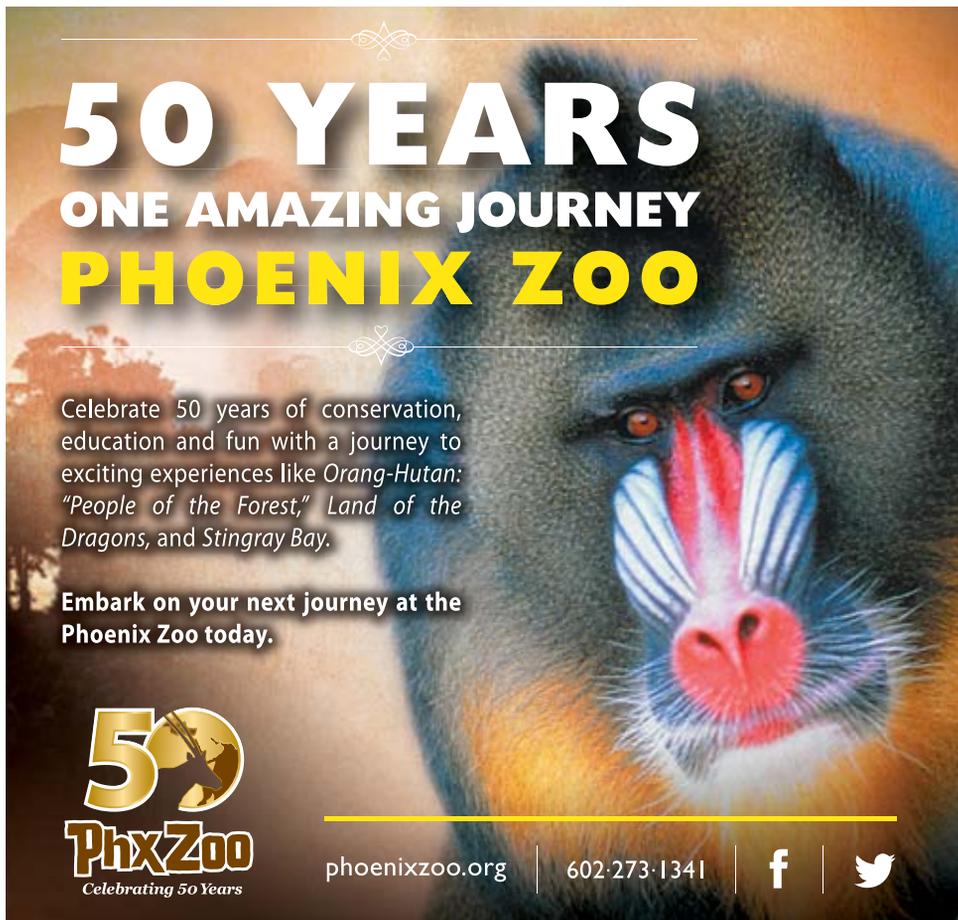
—Elizabeth Somer, M.A., R.D.

available in our diet. “Research shows we lack exposure to sunshine—anyone living in North America outside of Florida, California, and Arizona is likely not manufacturing enough vitamin D,” Karst says. We’re also not getting enough omega-3s fatty acids because our diet doesn’t contain enough fatty wild fish. Karst cites omega-3s as essential nutrients for heart, joints, brain and emotions, skin, memory, and focus.

And no vitamin is an island unto itself. “Vitamins work as teams,” says Somer. “If your diet is low in one nutrient, it’s low in others, too.” For example, if you are low in vitamin C, you probably are also low in vitamin A and folate (folic acid).

Gonzalez agrees, adding that a common problem today is the strong focus on single vitamins, antioxidants, and special herbs. “There really is no true single vitamin that’s more important than another or one that everyone is missing,” he says.

To these ends, keep in mind that supplements are meant to help you stay healthy and should not replace a well-balanced diet. “You need to eat really well *and* supplement responsibly,” Somer says. “You can’t eat fast food and junk, then take a supplement and think you’ve covered all your nutritional bases.” 



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