

Health & Wellness

Health Is More Than Just the Absence of Disease

By Katherine Sherif, MD, FACP

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When Greek physician Hippocrates made the age-old proclamation, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food," he probably didn't foresee a time when our produce would contain so few nutrients. But research has shown that fruits and vegetables today contain fewer nutrients than they did 50 years ago.

Green peppers used to contain as much as 60 milligrams of vitamin C compared to 15 milligrams today. And it's not just your peppers. Studies of various types of fruits and vegetables have found that over the past half-century there has been a notable decline in protein, calcium, phosphorus, iron, vitamin B2 (riboflavin) and vitamin C.

Now an apple a day doesn't necessarily keep the doctor away.

There's a lot of debate over what has caused the changes in the nutritional value of our produce. Is genetic modification to blame? Is our soil tainted? The answer is still unclear.

What we do know is that we're no longer guaranteed to get enough nutrients from food alone.

That's what makes vitamin supplements so important.

As the Director of Women's Primary Care at Jefferson, I help women manage their health – from basic preventive care and treatment of common medical conditions to guidance



on healthy lifestyle behaviors. Over the years, I've met many patients who initially thought they had some type of disease only to find that they had a nutritional deficiency. Even patients who may appear to be the picture of health could be nutrient deficient and not even know it. Just because you're not sick doesn't mean you're healthy.

I take supplements myself and now I often advise my patients to do the same. Vitamin supplements can be invaluable to achieving a balanced diet. But if you've ever taken a walk down the vitamin aisle, you know how crowded and confusing it can be. With over 31 varieties of vitamins – some listed as exclusive to a particular sex or age group – it can be daunting for patients to know what to choose.

I generally recommend supplements that you may no longer be getting in your food. Taking a multivitamin with all the essentials is the best thing you can do to ensure you're getting the right nutrients.

We rarely get enough vitamin D from our food and are even less likely to get it from the sun. In a research study, I tracked the vitamin D levels of 800 women over the course of five years. Of those 800 women, only two had optimal levels of vitamin D. Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to high rates of breast, colon, prostate and ovarian cancer, as well as high blood pressure, muscle weakness, pain and rickets.

Conversely, proper amounts of vitamin D improve the immune and

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autoimmune systems, contribute to lung and bone health and can have a substantial impact on cognitive function.

Omega-3 fatty acids not only affect fertility in women, but also play an important role in your brain and mood. 40 percent of each Omega-3 dose becomes part of the membranes in your brain, creating connections

between neurons. In those connections are your memories, dreams and present thoughts – an omega-3 helps improve all of these, bringing out the best you in both body and mind.

These are just a few examples of the impact supplements can have on your health and general well-being. While existing experimental data supports the use of supplements to maintain

optimal health, education and research are critical to understanding the full potential of supplements in the future. As a physician and an educator, I look forward to empowering patients with the most accurate information available on supplements so they can make smarter health decisions for themselves and their families.



Katherine Sherif, MD, FACP is Professor and Director of Jefferson Women's Primary Care, and Vice Chair, Department of Medicine. She is a nationally recognized expert in nutrition, hormone replacement therapy, and polycystic ovary syndrome. Two particular areas of interest include antiaging research and the role of omega-3 fatty acids in health and disease. For more information about Dr. Sherif's work, please email Katherine.Sherif@jefferson.edu.