

Alberta Healthy Living Program March 2024

(Diversity, Mandarin and Cantonese)

What's a dietitian?

Dietitians are regulated health professionals and use the science of nutrition to help people understand the connection between food and health.

When you meet with a dietitian, they will consider your medical history, culture, lifestyle, personal preferences, and goals to provide practical guidance to meet your nutritional needs, to prevent and treat health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

The top 5 reasons why your doctor may suggest you visit a dietitian:

- (1) You want to prevent or manage a health condition like diabetes, high cholesterol, or high blood pressure. With modifications to your diet and eating habits can improve or prevent onset of certain health conditions.
- (2) You have a digestive issue like acid reflux, irritable bowel symptoms. A dietitian can assist you to determine which foods and beverages cause you common symptoms like heart burn, abdominal pain, bloating, indigestion to name a few so that you can avoid or reduce these symptoms without compromising your nutritional well-being.
- (3) You have a food allergy or intolerance, many times it is difficult to know what to eat and to avoid. A dietitian can assist you to work out what foods you can safely eat and find substitutions to maintain the necessary nutrients your body needs to keep you healthy.
- (4) You want accurate, realistic advice to improve the way you eat and find a connection between food and your physical, mental, and emotional health. On social media, we are often presented with false information, and they can be confusing. Dietitians are trained to use the most up-to-date science and translate it into practical guidance that you can use to make nutritious food choices that are right for you.
- (5) In addition to the above, there are still many reasons to visit a dietitian, if you are looking for ways to eat healthy on a budget especially with the rising cost of food.

What is a vitamin and mineral supplement?

A vitamin and mineral supplement provide a variety of nutrients that are also found in many common foods we eat. These supplements are often called multivitamins and they come in the form of pills, chewable tablets, powders, and liquids.

Some multivitamins also contain other ingredients that are not vitamins or minerals. These include substances such as the antioxidants lutein and lycopene.

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Do I need to take a supplement?

When we eat a variety of nutritious foods, taking vitamin and mineral supplements are not generally required.

A supplement may be recommended by your healthcare team to help fill in the gaps such as an individual who cannot or do not eat a variety of foods because of food allergies or who eat a vegan diet, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Taking supplements cannot make up for unhealthy eating habits such as skipping meals, emotional eating, excessively snacking. Canada's Food Guide recommends vegetables and fruits, whole-grain foods, and protein foods as part of a nutritious food plan.

I often came across supplements that are labelled for certain people (such as women or seniors), are they being made differently?

You can find many types of supplements are advertised as being specially designed for men or for women or for certain age groups. A basic, regular multivitamin is generally acceptable for most people who wants to take a supplement. However, some people may prefer to take a supplement that is made for their gender or age group.

For examples, there are some kinds of specialized supplements which may be labelled as

- (i) Women's formulas which have extra iron, and this is because women who are still having periods need more iron than men do. Some women's formulas also contain extra calcium since women are more likely than men to get osteoporosis.
- (ii) Men's formulas which are lower in iron because men need less than premenopausal women.
- (iii) Senior formulas which are designed for older adults and usually have lesser vitamin K, iron, and more vitamin B12 and vitamin D3.
- (iv) Prenatal formulas which are designed for women who are planning to get pregnant or are pregnant or are breastfeeding. The supplements have extra folic acid and iron. Folic acid is important to prevent certain birth defect.

What should you look for when you pick a supplement?

1. Choose a supplement consists of a variety of vitamins and minerals (i.e. a multivitamin) rather than a supplement that provides only a single kind of vitamin or mineral (unless your doctor or dietitian has recommended that you take an individual vitamin or mineral). For example: vitamin D3.
2. Choose one supplement alongside with the foods you eat, provides the [Recommended Dietary Allowance](#) (RDA) for each vitamin and mineral.

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Taking supplements that provide a lot more than the RDA can cause health problems and this is especially important to be noted, for minerals and the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K. They are stored more easily in the body, and they can build up to dangerous levels, which can cause health problems.

3. Always check the expiration date of supplements. Do not buy supplements that have expired or that will expire before you can finish the bottle.
4. If the supplement has a Natural Product Number (NPN) or a Homeopathic Medicine Number (DIN-HM), the supplement meets Health Canada's standards for safety, quality, and health claims.
5. If you have a food allergy or intolerance, always check the label first. Some supplements may contain food ingredients, such as wheat, corn, eggs, or gelatin.

Is there a difference between natural and laboratory (synthetic) made vitamins?

There is no difference between a vitamin made in a laboratory (synthetic) vs one in its natural form. Once ingested into the body, these vitamins are used in the same way and for the same functions.

Do you have any additional information which I should watch for before I purchase a supplement?

1. No supplement can *cure* diseases such as cancer, [diabetes](#), [heart disease](#), or digestive problems. Always stay cautious of supplements that promise quick and dramatic results.
2. A generic brand (or store brand) often works just as well as a name-brand supplement. Look for generic brands that contain the same amount of vitamins and minerals as the name brand.

I have been having issues with hair loss and I am afraid that I may not be getting enough nutrients in my diet.

In most cases, hair loss is rarely linked to nutrition or what you eat. However, hair loss can be due to an extremely poor diet that is very low in protein and calories; Some studies have shown that deficiencies in B-vitamins, vitamin D, iron and zinc are associated to hair loss. If you are concerned about hair loss, speak to your health care provider before taking any supplements.

I have read from the social media that taking supplements such as calcium, biotin, chromium or protein will help my nails grow, or that soaking nails in gelatin will help strengthen them.

Based on the latest research, there is no proof to back up any of these claims. In fact, chromium and gelatin supplements have not even been tested and studied for their role in nail health. In short, more does not mean it is better.

Your nails could be affected by your diet only if you get too much or not enough of certain nutrients, such as vitamin B12, protein, iron or selenium, but these conditions are very rare in Canada.

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How can Alberta Healthy Living Program help support the Chinese in the community?

- We have one Registered Dietitian speaking both Mandarin and Cantonese who can offer one-on-one advice via phone, Zoom or in person meeting.
- These services have no charge and are covered by Alberta Health. You do not need a referral from a health care provider - you can just call to book appointment.
- All our programs and services can be accessed through one toll-free number: 1-844-527-1160. Please write this number down. An English recording will run and ask them to wait until a person answer to state Mandarin for the clerks to quickly access an interpreter.
- Better choices, better health (BCBH) for chronic disease management and BCBH-chronic pain that are offered in Cantonese, and they can register for this 6-week program (one 2.5-hour session per week) by also phoning toll-free: 1-844-527-1160.