

Food supplements

How to consume food supplements safely.

What is a food supplement?

A food supplement is defined in legislation as 'any food, the purpose of which is to supplement the normal diet, and which is a concentrated source of a vitamin or mineral or other substance with a nutritional or physiological effect, alone or in combination and is sold in dose form'.

Essentially, a food supplement is something you take to add extra nutrients to your normal meals. It usually has vitamins, minerals, or other helpful substances your body needs. These come in small amounts and are sold in things like pills, gummies, capsules, or powders.

What is a Healthy Balanced Diet?

The [Eatwell Guide](#) shows the types and proportions of the different types of foods and drinks that contribute to a healthy, balanced diet.

Most people should get the nutrients they need by eating a healthy balanced diet. However, some food supplements are recommended in certain circumstances, such as [vitamin D](#) during the autumn and winter, and [folic acid](#) when trying for a baby and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Food supplements are not intended to replace a varied and balanced diet. As they are not medicinal products, they should not be sold with claims that they can prevent, treat or cure a medical condition or any other types of symptoms in the body (such as menopause symptoms) as this is the function of medicines, and is an offence.

Forms in which food supplements are sold

The definition of food includes substances or products that are intended to be ingested by humans. This does not include substances that are intended to be injected into the body.

Food supplements are supplied in a number of different ingestable forms, which include:

- tablets
- capsules
- gummies
- powders
- liquids

Common types of food supplements

The types of food supplements that are commonly available include:

- vitamins & minerals such as vitamin D, vitamin C, folic acid, iron and magnesium
- sports/fitness supplements, such as protein powders and creatine
- specialty supplements, such as fish oils and omega-3
- botanical supplements, such as turmeric, ginseng and garlic, which are usually concentrated forms of those foods, often processed into powders.

To find out more about common vitamins and minerals, how much of them you need, how to ensure you get enough and what are the risks if you take too much, please visit [NHS UK](#).

Why do people take food supplements?

People take food supplements for various reasons, including to:

- meet additional needs due to age, dietary restrictions or lifestyle
- support general health, during pregnancy, and wellbeing
- help support exercise or similar activities

Tips when buying food supplements

Only buy food supplements over the internet if you are confident that the business is reputable.

Be especially careful if buying food supplements from online marketplaces where it may be more difficult to know who is selling the product and where it originates.

Beware of counterfeit products, particularly on the internet if the product's price is much cheaper than from other suppliers.

Check that any health claims that you see on products are authorised health claims on the [Great Britain nutrition and health claims \(NHC\) register](#).

Consuming food supplements safely

Always read the label and follow warnings and instructions – which will provide you with instructions on how to correctly consume the supplement, including the recommended daily dosage.

Do not take more than the recommended dose, as this can potentially lead to side effects such as nausea and headaches.

Check recommended safe dosage levels on NHS UK prior to starting to take supplements.

People should not take high dose supplements unless advised by their GP or healthcare specialist. This is so they can understand the need for taking them at a high level and give advice on how long the supplement should be taken.

Check with your GP or healthcare professional before taking a food supplement if you are pregnant, breastfeeding, have any medical conditions or are taking any regular prescribed medication.

Always tell your doctor about any food supplements you are taking if you are prescribed a medicine or given a medical diagnosis. Some supplements may interact negatively with prescribed medications or certain medical conditions.

You should also always tell your doctor about any herbal medicines that you are taking.

If you feel unwell after consuming food supplements

Stop taking the supplement immediately and contact your healthcare professional for advice.

Please do not change the dosage or try to rectify this yourself.

Reporting issues with food supplements

If you are concerned about the safety, labelling or claims made by a food supplement, you should [report the issue to your Local Authority or District Council](#). The Local Authority or District Council will report food safety incidents to the Food Standards Agency.