

Vitamins, minerals and nutrients

Magnesium

Magnesium is the most abundant mineral in the body. It is found in all of our tissues, especially in the bones, muscles, and brain.

All organs in the body need magnesium to function properly, as it helps in the following:

Nerve function, muscle function, mood balance, thyroid balance, healthy heart, bone health, sleep, calcium regulation, hormonal balance, blood pressure, healthy hair and nails.

Magnesium is required to:

Convert food into energy, create new proteins from amino acids, create and repair DNA and RNA, contract and relax muscles, regulate neurotransmitters that send messages throughout the brain and nervous system, contribute to the strength and formation of the bones and teeth, maintain proper levels of other nutrients like calcium, potassium, and zinc, absorb and use calcium for bone strength, get a better night's sleep, as it has relaxing properties.

Yet magnesium is one of the most common mineral deficiencies. Signs of a magnesium deficiency include:

Muscle tremors or spasms, muscle weakness, high blood pressure, confusion, insomnia, lack of appetite, constipation.

Many people have magnesium deficiency as their diets are heavy in processed foods, containing very little to no magnesium.

High levels of stress, drinking alcohol and coffee, and taking certain medications such as water tablets and antibiotics can all reduce magnesium absorption.

Great food sources of magnesium include:

Dark green leafy vegetables: kale, spinach, Swiss chard

Fruits: bananas, dried apricots, avocados

Nuts: almonds and cashews, hazelnuts

Legumes: lentils, beans, chickpeas, peas, soybeans, lima beans, blackeye peas, kidney beans

Seeds: flaxseeds, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, chia seeds

Soy products: tofu, edamame beans

Whole grains: brown rice and millet, oat, quinoa, bulgur Dark chocolate: I.e. Green & Blacks 85%

Oily fish: salmon, mackerel, tuna

Dairy foods: whole milk, yogurt, Greek yogurt

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps maintain strong and healthy bones by retaining calcium. It is produced in the skin when we are exposed to sunlight.

Between April and September, we usually get sufficient amounts of vitamin D from exposure to sunlight through time spent outdoors and dietary sources. Between October and March in the northern hemisphere, the sunlight is mostly not strong enough to produce vitamin D in the skin.

Deficiency signs are the following:

Joint pain or stiffness, backache, tooth decay, muscle cramps, hair loss, fatigue.

Here are seven common risk factors for vitamin D deficiency:

Having dark skin, being elderly, being overweight or obese, eating low amounts of fish or dairy, living far from the equator where there is little sun year-round, always using sunscreen when going out, staying indoors.

Vitamin D supplements are recommended by the Department of Health for those over five years old (10 µg/day) during October to March when sunlight is not strong enough to make vitamin D in the skin.

Good food sources of vitamin D are the following:

Herrings, mackerel, salmon, oysters, cottage cheese, eggs, red meat.

Calcium

Calcium is not just important for bone health. It also helps with the following:

Promotes a healthy heart, helps to clot blood, maintains healthy nerves, improves skin, bone, and tooth health, relieves aching muscles and bones, maintains the correct acid-alkaline balance in the body, reduces menstrual cramps and tremors.

Calcium deficiency signs include:

Muscle cramps or tremors, insomnia or nervousness, joint pain or arthritis, tooth decay, high blood pressure, lethargy, poor appetite, weak or brittle fingernails.

Good food sources of calcium are the following:

Nuts and seeds, like almonds, poppy, sesame, and chia seeds, tofu, whole grains, Brewer's yeast (nutritional yeast), prunes, parsley, dairy and yogurt, soybeans, sardines, vegetables like kale, broccoli, globe artichokes, cabbage, cooked dried beans, tinned salmon.

B Vitamins

There is a range of B vitamins that we need, and they are all important for different things. The different types of vitamin B are all found in various foods.

Symptoms of a deficiency depend on what type of vitamin B you lack. These symptoms can range from fatigue and confusion to anaemia and a compromised immune system. Skin rashes can also occur.

Here are details for two important B vitamins:

Vitamin B12

Also known as cobalamin, vitamin B12 helps in the following:

Regulating the nervous system, red blood cell growth and formation, using protein in the body, helping the blood carry oxygen, essential for energy, required for the synthesis of DNA, helps the body deal with tobacco smoke and other toxins.

As you age, your body loses some of its ability to absorb vitamin B12. Your risk of vitamin B12 deficiency increases. During menopause, you may become deficient in vitamin B12, which is linked to insomnia.

Symptoms of vitamin B12 deficiency are vague, but they include:

Fatigue, weakness, constipation, loss of appetite, numbness and tingling in the hands and feet, balance problems, irritability, anxiety or tension, depression, confusion, dementia, lack of energy, tender or sore muscles, oversensitivity to hot and cold, poor hair and skin problems, including eczema or dermatitis.

B12 has been suggested to treat memory loss, boost mood, and increase energy and concentration, although these benefits have not yet been proven in studies.

Vitamin B12 is found primarily in meat and dairy products, so anyone on a strict vegan diet is at risk of deficiency. The only other dietary sources of B12 are fortified foods.

Good sources of Vitamin B12 include:

Cottage cheese, turkey, chicken, red meat, cheese, eggs, milk, liver, shellfish (oysters), fish (tuna, mackerel, sardines, salmon).

Vitamin B6

Vitamin B6 (pyridoxine) helps the body:

Turn food into energy, fight infections, protein digestion and utilisation, brain function, hormone production, balance sex hormones, natural antidepressant and diuretic, control allergic reactions, helps babies' brains develop normally among pregnant and breastfeeding individuals.

Vitamin B6 also helps the body make serotonin, a chemical responsible for transmitting brain signals. As we age, serotonin levels drop. Fluctuating serotonin levels may be a contributing factor in the mood swings and depression common in menopause.

Taking a vitamin B6 supplement during and after menopause may help tame or prevent symptoms caused by low serotonin levels, including loss of energy and depression.

Vitamin B6 deficiency signs include:

Anaemia, depression, confusion, nausea, water retention, tingling hands, nervousness, irritability, lack of energy, susceptibility to infections, cracks around the mouth, infrequent dream control, muscle tremors or cramps, skin disorders such as rashes, dermatitis, and flaky skin.

Good food sources include:

Chickpeas, tuna, salmon, spinach, beef liver, beef mince, chicken breast, watermelon, potatoes, grains and cereals, cauliflower, watercress, cabbage, peppers, bananas, squash, broccoli, nuts and seeds, lentils, onions, asparagus, red kidney beans, Brussel sprouts.

Essential nutrients

These can be grouped into six categories:

Protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, water

They're essential because the body needs them for growth and cell maintenance, but it can't make them independently. It needs you to consume them.

Protein

Protein is essential for:

Building hormones and muscles, keeping the skin and nails healthy and strong, forming digestive enzymes.

As we get older and our metabolism slows down, we start losing muscle. Eating protein with each meal helps combat this by maintaining our muscle mass and balancing blood sugar levels. Eating protein throughout the day also keeps us full and satisfied, assisting with weight management.

We should eat protein in palm-sized portions. For example, a piece of meat or fish should be the size of the palm of our hand.

Eating adequate protein and a large number of green vegetables ensures that our diet is also rich in all bone-building nutrients, including magnesium, calcium, potassium, and vitamin K. We tend to think of meat and fish when we talk about protein sources, but many good protein sources are also vegetarian.

Good food sources of protein are:

Eggs, quinoa, tofu, cottage cheese, miso, tempeh, avocado, turkey, chicken, Greek yogurt, almond butter.
Seeds like pumpkin, flax, chia.

Oily fish like mackerel, sardines, wild salmon.

Nuts like almonds, peanuts, Brazil nuts, walnuts.

Legumes and pulses like soybeans, lentils, haricot beans, broad beans, kidney beans, lima beans, mung beans, black eye beans, chickpeas, bean sprouts.

Healthy fats

We tend to think fats are unhealthy. But the truth is, not all fats are bad.

While trans fats are to be avoided, some saturated and unsaturated fats can be helpful to our health.

Small amounts of unsaturated fats (omegas 3, 6 & 9) found in olive oil, nuts, and seeds are important for good nutrition because they have a protective effect on the heart and help lower cholesterol levels.

Coconut oil, although a saturated fat that does not contain omega oils, is actually one of the best sources of medium-chain fatty acids. Medium-chain fatty acids are rapidly broken down and absorbed by the body, making them less likely to be stored as fat.

It's easy to add these to our diet. Drizzle good oils onto salads and soups and add nuts and seeds to salads, breakfast porridge, yogurt, and baked goods.

Good food sources of healthy fats include:

Omega 3: hemp seeds, flax seeds, chia seeds, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, avocados, and oily fish such as mackerel, herrings, sardines.

Omega 6: leafy green vegetables, soya, olive oil, sunflower oil, sesame oil.

Omega 9: olives, extra virgin olive oil, sesame oil, nuts, avocados.

Complex carbohydrates

We need carbohydrates because they are the body's main energy source in a healthy, balanced diet.

There are three different types of carbohydrates found in food:

Sugar, starch, fibre

Healthy sources of carbohydrates, such as high-fibre starchy foods, include vegetables, fruits, and legumes.

It is important to choose complex or slow-releasing carbohydrates (fibre and starchy foods) rather than simple or fast-releasing carbohydrates (refined and processed foods, cakes, pastries, sugar, soft drinks, and syrups).

Simple carbohydrates are quickly digested and absorbed by the body, whereas complex carbohydrates take time to digest and are a stable energy source, unlike simple carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates should be eaten in moderation and not take up more than about a third of the plate. Any food can make you gain weight if you overeat.

The following foods also provide a wider range of nutrients (such as vitamins and minerals) beneficial to health. The fibre in these foods helps keep the bowels healthy and adds bulk to the meal, helping you feel full.

Good carbohydrate food sources include:

Quinoa, sweet potato, oats, brown rice, maize, butternut squash, millet, beans and pulses, nuts, buckwheat, vegetables, fruits like berries, apples, citrus.

When all is said and done, eating a diverse diet ensures a resilient microbiome and the growth of gut-friendly bacteria which make up 90% of the body's serotonin (feel-good hormone), so it plays a vital role in reducing the risk of anxiety.

So!!.....

Eat natural, unprocessed foods that encourage the growth of friendly gut bacteria.

Minimise processed foods and refined sugars that feed harmful bacteria.

Eat the rainbow! The more colourful your plate is, the better!

Incorporating a colourful variety of vegetables, fruits, and fibre-rich foods such as legumes and beans into your diet will provide you with much-needed probiotics.

Happy eating 🍷❤️