

Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.



ESTHER BUSH

Vitamins and Supplements

This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on vitamins and supplements. Jennifer R. Jones, MPH, community engagement coordinator with the University of Pittsburgh CTSI, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, sat down to discuss the chosen topic.

JJ: Good morning, Ms. Bush. It's always a pleasure to hear your perspectives on our health topic each month. For February, we're focusing on vitamins and supplements. I feel like this is a new trend. Protein shake commercials and herbal supplement advertisements seem to be quite popular recently.

EB: Yes, Jennifer. I've noticed that too. With so much information, it's sometimes hard to know what is best for our bodies. And what makes it even more difficult is that we each are different. What is beneficial for one person may not be beneficial for someone else.

JJ: That's very true, Ms. Bush. I talked with a researcher and dietician at Pitt about this topic. Her key message was to remember that the starting point of our nutritional intake should be from the food we eat. A balanced diet is very important. Vitamins and supplements are necessary to add to that nutritional intake, but only when we need it. Like you mentioned, it's tricky because the levels that



each body needs is different.

EB: Our bodies are really complex, aren't they?

JJ: They certainly are! As Dr. Berenbrok discusses in the overview, it's important to talk to a health care professional, whether that's your primary care physician, nurse or a pharmacist. They can answer questions and give you advice about the vitamins and supplements that you should take or may not even need. They'll be able to assess your medical history and your current prescriptions to make sure that you don't have any harmful reactions. They will also be able to help you with making healthy lifestyle choices.

EB: Those are wonderful things to know Jennifer. What are we talking about next month?

JJ: Next month we are talking about a delicate topic – drugs. There's a lot of research happening in our city, and many people are affected by this horrible epidemic. As always, thank you for your time.

For more information or with questions, e-mail partners@hs.pitt.edu.



Which dietary supplement is right for you?

Do you take a daily multivitamin? An herbal supplement? How about a pill that advertises weight loss? If so, you are a part of the majority of people in the U.S. (according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) who add to their diet by using vitamins, minerals, herbals and amino acids, to name a few. Chances are, you are also someone who has not talked about what you are taking with your health care provider. How do people know which supplement is right for them?

People naturally have questions about supplements. Do they work? How do they work? Answers to these questions are not as obvious as they would be for medicines that health providers prescribe. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is the federal agency that oversees both dietary supplements and medicines. Prescription and over-the-counter drugs have to be reviewed and approved by the FDA. Before drugs are allowed to be advertised and sold, the companies that make them have to test the drugs and submit proof that the drugs are safe and effective. Dietary supplements are not approved as drugs by the FDA. Companies that advertise and sell vitamins, minerals or herbal supplements do not have to get FDA approval to sell their products. But the FDA would step in if it found a product to be unsafe or the manufacturer to be making false claims about the product.

When health care providers prescribe medications to patients, they are taking into account what health conditions the patients have, how much and how often they need to take the medicine, any allergies they have and many other factors. The same considerations are important when making decisions about taking dietary supplements. Doctors usually ask their patients to list all the supplements patients are taking. They will help patients know what is best for them. But people probably do not see their doctors as frequently as they are in a drug store. It is often

pharmacists who figure prominently in people's decisions to take supplements.

"It's really important to establish a relationship with a pharmacist much as you do with any other health care provider," says Lucas A. Berenbrok, PharmD, assistant professor of pharmacy and therapeutics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy. "Pharmacists are good at keeping accurate and current medication lists that we can share with anybody (with the patient's permission) on the patient's health care team. Part of that list should include dietary supplements because they can interact—sometimes harmfully—with prescription medications.

"Pharmacists want to know why patients want to take supplements: Do they feel their diet is missing something? Are they trying to get calcium from a multivitamin? We know calcium is good for bone health, but people might not need the extra vitamins and minerals included in that multivitamin. There is the possibility of supplements interacting with prescription medications. People shouldn't assume that every supplement is ok for everyone. Get help to figure out what's best for you."

Dr. Berenbrok also points out that pharmacists can help with dosing questions—knowing how much of a supplement to take and how often. Even the very small print on a bottle label can prevent someone from taking the correct dose.

How do people know if they need a dietary supplement? The question is best answered



LUCAS A. BERENBROK, PHARM.D

in a conversation with a health care provider who knows the person's health history, specific concerns and all current medications and supplements. If people feel their diet is lacking something, the website <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/> provides information about healthy eating. No one should diagnose themselves and use supplements as medicine. Supplements are not meant to treat disease.

Getting help with supplements can be as easy as walking over to the pharmacy counter. As Dr. Berenbrok reminds us, "Pharmacies are pretty accessible. They're open in the evenings, weekends and some holidays. And they are staffed by medication experts."

Vitamin D and a Healthy Heart Research Study Opportunity

Vitamin D is important for our bone health. Maintaining adequate vitamin D levels in our blood may be beneficial for our heart-health. Our bodies make vitamin D when a particular range of ultraviolet rays in the sunlight touches our skin. We can also get vitamin D from foods and supplements.

Vitamin D deficiency (low levels of vitamin D) is common during winter among people living in the northern parts of the U.S., in places such as Pittsburgh. The reason is because there isn't much vitamin D-producing sunlight during winter. The risk of vitamin D deficiency is greater among people with dark skin color because they have higher

levels of melanin pigment in their skin. Melanin pigment is a natural sunscreen and blocks the vitamin D-producing sunlight. Therefore, a person with a darker skin color will need more sunlight exposure to make the same amount of vitamin D as a person with lighter skin color. Obese individuals also have a higher risk of vitamin D deficiency as vitamin D gets trapped in their body fat.

Dr. Kumaravel Rajakumar, M.D., associate professor of Pediatrics, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, is conducting a NIH-funded research study to see if increasing the vitamin D levels



DR. KUMARAVEL RAJAKUMAR, M.D

of vitamin D-deficient children with obesity can improve their heart-health. Healthy 10- to 18-yr-old children who are overweight are potentially eligible for participation. Eligible participants found to have low vitamin D levels in a screening blood test can join the study. Compensation and parking will be provided.

If you are interested to learn more, please contact **Dr. Kumaravel Rajakumar at 412-692-5415 or D3VHStudy@chp.edu**. Information about the study is also available at www.chp.edu/d3vh.