

WHETHER while watching television, flipping through a magazine or walking the aisles at the supermarket, we are bombarded with dietary supplements that promise a battery of cures. One pill will make up in nutrients where your diet lacks, another gives you that oh-so-needed 3 p.m. energy boost, the next pill promises to make your hair, skin and nails stronger/younger/softer, and still another supplement will melt away those excess pounds accumulating around your midsection.

The list of dietary supplements — vitamins and minerals, as well as herbs, botanicals and other substances — seems to go on without end, from multivitamins to proteolytic enzymes and weight-loss aids. With so many options, how do you decide which dietary supplements you need and which ones are gimmicks that do nothing but empty your wallet? Is it really necessary to swallow six pills, drink three protein shakes or wear a dermalpatch to reach a desired goal?

Joanne Gordon, a certified nutritionist at the Princeton Fitness and Wellness Center, explains, “People are not informed because



Supplement Overload

Ginseng, TrimSpa and Omega 3, Oh, my!

Photo by Scott Rothstein

of so much conflicting information.” Because of this misinformation, finding appropriate dietary supplements becomes a trying task. The best thing people can do when deciding what is right for them is consult their doctor or a nutritionist, advises Ms. Gordon.

The Office of Dietary Supplements (a branch of the National Institutes of Health) composed a

checklist for patients to bring to their health care provider or nutritionist while discussing whether or not to take a dietary supplement. (Visit <http://ods.od.nih.gov/pubs/partnersbrochure.asp> for a copy of the nutrition assessment.)

Consider your lifestyle. Do you smoke or drink coffee or alcohol? What are your eating and exercise habits? Ms. Gordon is registered

with the ADA (American Dietetic Association) and is currently involved in a holistic masters program. “Holistic nutrition is more about lifestyle and the foods you eat to have a healthy body,” she explains. Ms. Gordon believes that the better your lifestyle and eating habits, the fewer dietary supplements you will need.

Whether because of internal or

external factors, more and more people buy supplements to compensate for lifestyle or dietary habits that they prefer not to change. Carol Haggans, M.S., R.D., Scientific and Healthcare Communication Consultant for the Office of Dietary Supplements, says people site a variety of reasons for taking supplements. Some individuals consider it insurance, filling in the gaps for not eating right; others say they feel better when taking supplements; some believe doing so will maintain health and ward off disease; and still, others take supplements to have a sense of control over their own health.

Ms. Haggans says that for most people, following the food pyramid and eating the right foods should be enough. She acknowledges this is not the case for everyone. A high percentage of people tend to be deficient in calcium, Ms. Haggans says. Teenage girls and women of child-bearing age may be iron-deficient, while older people are more likely to be deficient in Vitamins B12 and D, she explains.

Ms. Gordon feels everyone should take a multivitamin in conjunction with a healthy diet. She also says that the diets of most people do not contain enough cal-

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cium. In today's society, she explains, people consume a diet high in fat, processed meats and cheeses, fast food and high-protein foods (which are high in phosphates). "Basically, it is the high protein that the American diet consumes that may cause an imbalance in the phosphorus-to-calcium ratio. This imbalance can lead to loss of calcium from the bones, which can lead to osteoporosis," Ms. Gordon explains. "Soda, which so many consume way too much of, also is high in phosphorus and can lead to the same imbalance ... I don't want people to be misled and think that phosphorus is bad," Ms. Gordon continues. "It is still an important mineral." It is the imbalance that comes from this form of eating that becomes the problem.

As President of Baseline of Health Foundation and International Health Resources, John Barron's views fall along a similar line. "If people ate well-grown food and avoided toxins, no supplements would be needed," he said. But that just isn't realistic for most people in our society. We skip breakfast, eat junk food for a mid-afternoon pick-me-up, forgo vegetables for a serving of fries or

get minimal amounts of calcium from the foods and drinks we consume.

Mr. Barron has been involved in the study of nutrition and premature aging for more than 30 years. He recommends that people take a number of daily dietary supplements to compensate for this lifestyle. He also points to exposure to daily toxins in the environment and the idea that the food we eat today is not what it once was. "Ultimately, you have to supplement," he says.

Mr. Barron recommends a daily multi-vitamin, omega-3 fatty acids, a trace mineral supplement, a good probiotic and digestive enzymes with every meal. His reasoning for taking a variety of supplements is that you are only as strong as the weakest link. The idea behind his products is to keep each system in the body at the optimal level. "There is no magic bullet when it comes to health and there are many things to look at for better health," Mr. Barron says. (For more information, visit www.jonbarron.org.)

While Ms. Gordon would never recommend diet pills for weight loss or supplements, such as ginseng, for energy (a healthy diet and exercise should support both

weight loss and energy), she does see the benefit in nutritional supplements. Antioxidants and phytochemicals (which protect against damage from free radicals), probiotics (like acidophilus, which restores good bacteria to your gut) and omega 3 fatty acids (which support heart and brain health) can all be found in food products. For example, acidophilus is found in yogurt, antioxidants and phytochemicals are found in fruits and vegetables; omega 3s are found in fish. However, many American diets do not provide adequate amounts of such nutrients and, therefore, may benefit from supplementation.

When deciding on which brands to buy do your research, Ms. Haggans says. Find out if the supplement is backed by scientific evidence. Talk with your physician and find out if he knows of any ongoing research about specific supplements. Keep in mind that just because it's natural, it does not mean it's safe, Ms. Haggans says. She also reminds that some nutrients, such as Vitamins A, D and K can be toxic to the body when taken in high doses.

Do your research, talk to a physician or nutritionist and make the safest, smartest decision for yourself. Your body will thank you.