

Dietary Supplements During Your Cancer Treatment

Dietary Supplements

A dietary supplement is something you can eat or drink to give your body what it needs to function at its best.

It is important to know that some dietary supplements can affect how well your cancer treatment works or cause side effects.

Your health care provider or dietitian will work with you to decide if dietary supplements are right for you.

Types of Dietary Supplements

There are many types of dietary supplements that are made from:

- vitamins and minerals
- antioxidants
- hormones
- herbs and plant sources
- other natural substances (such as omega-3 fatty acids).

Some people need to drink meal replacements when they are not able to eat solid food.

A meal replacement provides extra calories and the nutrition your body needs during your cancer treatment. Your health care provider or dietitian will tell you if you should add meal replacements to your diet.

Safety of Dietary Supplements

Dietary supplements can be harmful.

Many have high levels of antioxidants, which may prevent your cancer treatment from working as well as it should. Other supplements may be harmful for other reasons.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates dietary supplements. Manufacturers are responsible for making sure the products they produce:

- are safe
- have truthful claims on the label.

The FDA can take a supplement off the market if they have evidence that it is unsafe or a claim on the label is false.

It is important to tell your health care provider about any:

- supplements you are already taking
- new supplements you want to try taking during your treatment.

Do not start taking any dietary supplements without first talking with your health care provider.

(over)

How to Read a Dietary Supplement Label

The FDA requires that each dietary supplement label includes:

- product name
- the word “supplement”
- quantity of contents (for example, how many pills are in a bottle)
- instructions
- manufacturer’s name and address
- a facts panel (lists how much of each ingredient is in the supplement)
- other ingredients
- warnings.

If you are already taking a dietary supplement, show the bottle or container to your health care provider, pharmacist or dietitian. He or she can tell you whether the supplement is right for you.

What to Watch For on the Label

It is important to read all dietary supplement labels carefully. Don’t be tempted by “buzzwords” (popular words or phrases with little meaning).

Watch for common “buzzwords” such as:

- “high potency”
- “natural”
- “anti-aging”
- “super”
- “prevents cellular damage”
- “advanced”
- “powerhouse.”

When You May Need to Take Dietary Supplements

Eating a variety of healthful foods is the best way to get the nutrients your body needs during your cancer treatment.

You may not feel like eating or drinking during treatment. Talk with your health care provider if you are having problems eating or drinking.

You may need to take a dietary supplement if you have:

- more than one food allergy or intolerance (foods that cause a reaction)
- a vitamin or mineral deficiency (low levels of a vitamin or mineral in your body)
- problems eating or drinking
- unexpected weight loss or gain.

Together, you and your health care provider will decide if supplements are right for you.

Whom to Call with Questions

Call your health care provider, pharmacist or dietitian if you have any questions about dietary supplements.