

Natural Health Products

Natural health products include vitamin and mineral supplements, herbal products, Chinese and other traditional medicines, and other products such as probiotics, amino acid or essential fatty acid supplements. Sometimes we call these products “dietary supplements”. Natural health products are found in a variety of forms such as tablets, powders, capsules, among other forms.

It is important to weigh the possible health benefits and risks of taking dietary supplements.

Are dietary supplements helpful?

Some dietary supplements are helpful for specific groups of people. For example, calcium supplements can help you get enough calcium when you can’t meet your needs with food alone, or iron supplements can help correct an iron deficiency. **Supplements are not a replacement for healthy eating.**

There have been a number of studies to understand if specific vitamin or mineral supplements or other natural health products affect the growth of prostate cancer or the chance of prostate cancer returning (recurrence). Studies have shown mixed results. Many studies suggest no effect and others suggest potential benefit, while some have had surprising and alarming findings suggesting harm for some people. At this time, there is no strong evidence that any dietary supplement protects against prostate cancer, the growth of prostate cancer, or its recurrence.

Are dietary supplements safe?

Dietary supplement can come from animals, plants and other sources. Often, people see them as “natural” and believe they are harmless. For this reason, sometimes people think it worth trying a supplement that hasn’t been proven to be helpful. Yet, compared to their natural source, dietary supplements can provide a higher amount of a nutrient in a very concentrated or condensed form. It is possible to get too much when you take supplements. When you get too much of some nutrients there can be harmful effects. In fact, we know that many supplements at high levels aren’t safe for many people.

For men with prostate cancer we specifically advise caution with selenium and vitamin E supplements. Caution is also recommended for beta-carotene supplements. They haven’t been shown to protect against prostate cancer, but can increase the risk of lung cancer in people who smoke or have smoked in the past. The safety of many dietary supplements during cancer treatment is also not clear. Dietary supplements can have the potential to interfere with cancer treatments, to interact with medications such as chemotherapy drugs, and could have other unpredictable unwanted effects.

Recommendations

Eat food rather than take supplements as much as possible.

Aim to meet your nutritional needs by eating food. Food is the best source for vitamins, minerals and other food compounds. Food provides a variety of beneficial compounds that work together in special ways to support your best health. Some we know about and others are still being discovered.

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You can see more on these handouts:

- Prostate Cancer – Nutrition and Prostate Cancer Overview
- Prostate Cancer – Frequently Asked Questions
- Prostate Cancer – Healthy Eating

Use dietary supplements when needed for overall health.

At different stages in life, if you have certain medical conditions or treatments, or if your food choices are limited, you may need to take specific dietary supplements. For example:

- People older than 50 years should take a 400 IU vitamin D supplement daily.
- Men receiving hormone therapies for prostate cancer are at risk for bone loss and may need calcium supplements to meet their needs if they don't eat enough food source of calcium.
- A one-a-day multivitamin and mineral supplement may help improve your nutrition if you can't eat a well-balanced diet during or after your cancer treatment. Look for a regular strength one-a-day multivitamin and mineral supplement. These are not high dose and provide vitamins and minerals in amounts close to the daily recommendations for adults.
- If you need an individual vitamin or mineral supplement take the correct dose.
 - For each vitamin and mineral, there is an amount we need for good health and a level that is too much. If we do not get enough we can have a nutrient deficiency, but we can also have health problems when we get too much. For some vitamins and minerals there is a small difference between what is needed for good health and what is too much.
 - Be cautious with high dose dietary supplements.
- If you think dietary supplements would be helpful for you talk with your dietitian, pharmacist, nurse, or doctor about the correct amount to take.

Do not take supplements to treat or prevent prostate cancer

Vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements have not been proven to prevent cancer from getting worse or returning. Research suggests that some supplements could be harmful for some people.

- A large study (called the SELECT trial) looked at the effects of selenium and vitamin E supplements on risk for prostate cancer. The study had surprising findings that were the opposite of what was expected. Taking selenium or vitamin E supplements alone or together did not decrease the risk of prostate cancer. Instead, the results suggested a higher risk for prostate cancer when men took vitamin E supplements. They also found that when men took selenium supplements they had a higher risk of developing prostate cancer if they already had enough selenium in their body.

- Another study of men with early stage prostate cancer suggested that taking selenium supplements increased the chance of dying.
- Vitamin E and selenium supplements are not recommended

Be cautious with dietary supplements after diagnosis and during cancer treatment.

Dietary supplements might affect cancer growth or how cancer treatments work.

- If you need a specific supplement for your health speak with a dietitian, pharmacist, nurse or doctor to check that it can be taken during your treatment.
- Avoid large doses of beta-carotene, selenium, vitamin E and vitamin C supplements while on treatment.
 - Beta-carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E, and selenium, and other dietary supplements may act as antioxidants. Antioxidants may prevent treatments from working their best. Foods rich in antioxidants are safe to eat during cancer treatment
- Avoid dietary supplements that contain male hormones or androgens.
 - Dietary supplements that contain male hormones may increase levels of the male hormone testosterone. Male hormones may cause prostate cancer growth. DHEA and Siberian ginseng are examples of dietary supplements that contain male hormones. Avoid these and other dietary supplements containing male hormones as they may cause your cancer to grow.

Ideas to put into action

- Speak with a pharmacist, doctor or registered dietitian about your individual needs before taking supplements.
- If you are considering a supplement:
 - Know what you are taking and why you are taking the product.
 - Review the evidence for possible health benefits and risks with your health care provider.
 - Is there credible evidence that it might be helpful?
 - Are there any safety concerns? This could include side effects of the product, interactions with treatments, medications or other products or concerns related to any other health problems you have.
 - If you decide to try the product make a plan.
 - How long will you take it for?
 - How will you know if it is being helpful?
- Review any current supplement use with your health care provider before starting cancer treatment.

For more information:

- The Joint Recommendation from the BC Cancer Departments of Medical Oncology, Radiation Oncology, Surgical Oncology, Pharmacy, Nursing and Nutrition handout from BC Cancer

This information is not meant to replace the medical counsel of your doctor or individual consultation with a registered dietitian. This information may only be used in its entirety. Authorization given to reproduce this information with acknowledgement to the Prostate Cancer Supportive Care (PCSC) Program.

Nutrition. Available at: <http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/cancer-management-guidelines/supportive-care/natural-health-products>

For information and advice based on your specific food and nutrition needs and preferences, speak to your clinic dietitian or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 and ask to speak to a registered dietitian.

Call to register for the **Prostate Cancer Supportive Care (PCSC) Program's** Nutrition and Exercise modules (Modules 3N and 3E). To find a PCSC Program near you, please visit: www.pcscprogram.ca.

