

GOOD HEALTH

By LOUISE ATKINSON

Are tailor-made supplements really worth the money?

They promise a perfect prescription for your needs – but, at up to £150 a month, some are simply a bitter pill to swallow...

DECIDE you want to take a vitamin supplement or two, and you face a barrage of choice – in price, formulations and health claims – and it can be impossible to know which are the best for you.

This confusion has led to a rise in the popularity of online companies that promise to provide a tailor-made supplement 'prescription' based on aspects of your health, such as your diet and any medical concerns.

Internet supplement sales are growing fast and personalised services are leading the charge. The UK supplements market is worth more than £442million and in the U.S., where 'personalised nutrition' is more established, the sector is growing 7 per cent every year.

It is a simple formula: you click through an online quiz – which asks you basic questions about your age, health, and what you want to achieve from supplements – and the results are fed into an algorithm that pumps out a 'personalised' prescription. The supplements are then delivered monthly to your door. Prices range from £20 to £150 each month, and you can retake the quiz at any time to adjust your prescription.

I set out to investigate what these personalised supplements were like and what they'd recommend for me – a 56-year-old woman with all the usual health niggles that appear in middle age.

Each time, I'd do an online quiz. Some were quick to fill in, others took about 15 minutes. Some asked about my diet (given the option, I said pescatarian and lactose intolerant), others about menopausal symptoms or medication.

WHEN taking the quizzes, I would click on the boxes indicating I was looking for supplements to support good health – my main problems being poor sleep, poor digestion, occasional lack of energy, brain fog, and stress.

My 'prescription' would promptly appear on screen and the results were worryingly varied.

I tried eight firms, entering the same information. But no two had the same prescription.

Based on my medical history (and the fact I am on hormone replacement therapy or HRT), I should have been offered a multivitamin and mineral supplement, probiotics to aid my digestive problems; and fish oil for omega-3 (for brain and eye health, as well as being anti-inflammatory), says Margaret Rayman, professor of nutritional medicine at the University of Surrey.

In particular, the multivitamin and mineral supplement should contain the government-recommended daily amounts of vitamin D (10mcg, or 400IU), plus the nutrients I lose out on as I can't have dairy: calcium (for strong bones), iodine (for making thyroid hormones that help metabolism), and vitamin B12 (for red blood cells and nerve function), particularly as I am over 50.

So how many of these personalised services prescribed the supplements I really needed? I took my prescriptions to Professor Rayman, who rated them.

BIONIQ
£150 per month, en.bioniq.com

CLAIM: An at-home blood test measures 35 parameters, including cholesterol, vitamin and mineral levels and hormones such

as insulin (which controls blood sugar levels).

This is combined with the results of an online quiz to formulate a personalised mix of slow-release 'granules' to sprinkle over food or add to a smoothie. You can message an 'agent' via WhatsApp, and have a new blood test after three months to check improvements.

MY PRESCRIPTION: One scoop twice a day, which contains: vitamins A, B3 (niacin), C, D, E, K2, as well as copper,

beta-carotene, bioflavonoids, coenzyme Q10 and lutein.

MY VERDICT: A phlebotomist arrived at my house to take blood (an extra £97 if you live outside the M25) and the results appeared on my online account a week later, followed by the supplement in the post. My blood test revealed elevated cholesterol and triglycerides (blood fats), low levels of copper, but higher than average levels of zinc and vitamin E.

I was shocked that my cholesterol and blood fats were higher than they should be, so I told my Bioniq agent via WhatsApp, who

suggested I mention it to my GP, reassuring me that the coenzyme Q10 and niacin in my formula would help address that.

This is a sleek offering, but extortionately expensive and I think it might be easier to swallow a few pills than to scatter granules over my food twice a day (although they taste pleasantly nutty).

EXPERT VERDICT: A blood sample can give useful information on micronutrients as well as blood sugar and cholesterol readings.

However, these supplements will not correct elevated cholesterol levels. It also seems wrong that

these contain high levels of vitamin E, when your blood test shows you already have enough.

And the formula only contains one B vitamin (niacin), and no B12 – surprising as our need for this vitamin rises in later life. Someone over 50 could benefit from 25mcg of vitamin B12 daily.

There is no iodine or selenium (which is antiviral and required by the immune system), which would also be useful in mid-life, yet the supplement contains carotenoids and bioflavonoids, which have unproven benefits. The high cost cannot be justified once the blood tests are paid for.

1/10

CHEWY SWEET TO DELIVER THE VITAMINS YOU NEED

NOURISHED, £39.99 per month, get-nourished.com

CLAIM: You take an online quiz to get your personal 'prescription', which comes in the form of a sugar-free chewable sweet, formed of a stack of seven differently coloured layers of gel – each layer containing a particular supplement.

MY PRESCRIPTION: The daily 'stack' contains vitamins A and D, resveratrol (a compound found in red grape skins said to protect the brain from disease), selenium,

ginger, silica (a mineral believed to aid bone and skin health), and extract of ashwagandha (a herb believed to ease stress).

MY VERDICT: This is clearly aimed at an entry level supplement-taking market that prefers a chewy sweet to swallowing pills, but I confess I was excited to receive my box of individually wrapped 'stacks', which taste like ginger-flavoured fruit gums.

EXPERT VERDICT: Resveratrol has been 'prescribed' for brain health here, but there is much more evidence for B vitamins – particularly B6, B9 (folate) and B12 – for memory and protecting the brain from dementia, and the

prescription contains a much lower dose of resveratrol (100mg) compared to the 250mg to 1,000mg shown to be beneficial in studies.

The vitamin D (300IU) included is not high enough to be beneficial, and although the 'stack' also has vitamin A for eye health, research shows plant compounds lutein and zeaxanthin (which we can get from green leafy veg) would have been better options.

The published studies on ashwagandha extract are inconclusive and use doses five to ten times higher than those in this product. Although some people prefer a chewable supplement to swallowing pills, this is essentially an expensive and not particularly efficacious sweet.

4/10



Boxed sets: Louise with a range of supplements from online companies

'A STRANGE AND LIMITED PRESCRIPTION'

VITAMIN BUDDY, £25 per month, vitaminbuddy.co.uk

CLAIM: Set up by a British nutritional therapist, this will help 'you get the vitamins you need to feel that tiny bit healthier, happier and energetic'.

MY PRESCRIPTION: Three daily capsules – magnesium, vitamin A, and vitamin D with calcium and vitamin K1.

MY VERDICT: The questionnaire is quick and uncomplicated. A £5 introductory offer (for one week's supply) is temptingly cheap, but my



stress levels rise at the automatically activated monthly subscription.

A bright yellow box arrives with seven tiny zip-lock bags (one for each day), containing three capsules in each.

EXPERT VERDICT: This is a very strange and limited prescription. The calcium, magnesium and vitamins D and K1 are appropriate for post-menopausal bone health, but it is irrational to pick out certain nutrients (such as vitamin A) and omit others (such as vitamin B12, iodine and selenium), which you need. **1/10**

'Wellness Team', which includes a dietitian.

MY PRESCRIPTION: Six daily capsules – two 'calcium complex' capsules (with calcium, magnesium, zinc, boron and vitamins C, D and K), B complex (with B2, B3, B6, B12, ginseng, iron, coenzyme Q10, and guarana seed extract), two magnesium and rhodiola capsules (with magnesium, lemon balm, L-theanine, rhodiola root, plus vitamins B1, B2, B3, B5 and B6) – plus a probiotic.

MY VERDICT: This is the only quiz to ask me to specify which menopause symptoms bother me most, and if I want to focus on digestion, immunity or heart health. I plump for digestion. I like the fact that the capsules are composite and come in individual sachets.

EXPERT VERDICT: The combination of supplements seems reasonable and includes vitamin B12, vitamin D and calcium – all important for the over-50s. The probiotic is a bonus and could be helpful for gut health.

However, there is no iodine, which may be a problem if you're not consuming dairy. And the evidence base for rhodiola root in the treatment of mood problems – as prescribed here – is weak. **6/10**

PERSONA

£53 per month, personanutrition.com

CLAIM: This U.S. company offers 'personalised vitamin recommendations, backed by science'. It focuses on the importance of understanding drug/nutrient interactions, and offers advice from dietitians.

MY PRESCRIPTION: Eight daily capsules – two multivitamins, vitamin D, probiotic, nicotinamide (a form of vitamin B3), 'herbal rest' (with magnesium, L-theanine and hops), cordyceps mushroom extract and 'immune support' (with astragalus, reishi and beta glucan).

MY VERDICT: The detailed quiz took 15 minutes. I identified my top health concerns as menopause, energy and sleep. But the results page is complicated, and it is difficult to see which supplements are being suggested.

In my confusion I repeated the quiz three times and each time I got a different prescription and price. At one point, my monthly total reached \$99 (£77) and I have no idea how or why.

The package takes two weeks to arrive from the U.S. The capsules are arranged in two individual



daily sachets, labelled 'Morning Louise' and 'Bedtime Louise'.

EXPERT VERDICT: It's good that this quiz checks for interactions with your medication. The probiotic and multivitamin/mineral supplement seem like good choices. But I'm unsure why you are prescribed extra nicotinamide as there is already 8mg (50 per cent of recommended daily amount) in the multivitamin D – and the same goes for the extra vitamin D.

I doubt the added value of the other components – there have been no robust trials of the mushroom extract, for example. **5/10**

VITL

£24.95 per month, vitl.com

CLAIM:

A subscription service backed by doctors and scientists from 'leading organisations around the world', including King's College London.

MY PRESCRIPTION: Four daily capsules – a probiotic, energy complex (with magnesium, iodine, ginseng, chromium, selenium, and vitamins B1, B2, B3, B5, B6, B9, B12, C, and D), magnesium with calcium, 'tranquility blend' (magnesium, vitamin D3, 5-HTP, lemon balm, hops, L-theanine and ashwagandha).

MY VERDICT: After the quiz I am given the option of one 'personalised' multivitamin/mineral pill (£14.95) or four daily capsules (£24.95). I go for the latter (I hope it will be more comprehensive) and the vitamins arrive in blister packs in a yellow box marked 'Hey Louise!'.

The prescription comes with dietary and lifestyle advice plus recipes. Since joining I have been bombarded with daily emails. **EXPERT VERDICT:** The probiotic is a good idea, but the other capsules contain rather pointless combinations with a doubtful rationale for putting the various components together.

You would be better off combining the probiotic with a good multivitamin/mineral supplement that would contain all the nutrients you need in appropriate doses. Although the vitamin D does meet the recommended daily amount, a slightly larger dose would be preferable. **3/10**

VITMEDICS

£32 per month, vitmedics.com

CLAIM: The company was established by a pharmacist with a masters in nutritional medicine who is an expert in 'corrective personalised recommendations'. The online quiz includes questions about the medicines you take and picks up common drugs that affect nutrient absorption.

MY PRESCRIPTION: Seven daily pills – two multivitamin and mineral supplements, a combined selenium and zinc tablet, vegan omega-3 capsule and vitamin B12, C and D pills.

MY VERDICT: The website focuses more on information than hard selling (unlike others). My recommended 'prescription' is emailed over, with a list of foods that might correct any imbalances, and links to studies which back up the recommendations. I have the option of buying the pills elsewhere or clicking through to buy on the website.

The science and the soft-sell approach give me confidence in the prescription. **EXPERT VERDICT:** This is a sensible service which could be important for anyone on a range



of medicines. It's good to have an appreciation of the adverse effect some drugs can have on nutrition – one example is metformin, prescribed for type 2 diabetes, which can reduce the absorption of vitamin B12 in the gut and lead to deficiency.

Fish oil would be a better option than vegan omega-3 capsules (for heart and brain health) as lots of people don't eat adequate amounts of oily fish to get enough of this nutrient. But as the doses in the multivitamin/mineral pills are low, the additional vitamin B12 and vitamin D pills are a good idea.

With vitamin C and selenium in the multivitamin, you don't really need the extra pill, but the antiviral effects of selenium might make the additional 100mcg useful with Covid-19 around. **9/10**

HEALTHBOX

£19.62 per month, hollandandbarrett.com

CLAIM: Complete the 'health and consultation' online and get a month's worth of 'nutritionist-recommended' supplements, with each day's pills separated into plastic packs.

MY PRESCRIPTION: Eight daily pills – three magnesium tablets, two flaxseed

capsules (suggested for brain health), two wild yam root pills (suggested to help balance female hormones), and a timed-release vitamin C with rosehip.

MY VERDICT: The quiz seems simplistic and not as polished as others, but does ask about medication (I tick HRT). This is definitely the best value option, but I am intrigued that this system includes herbal remedies. And eight big tablets a day is a challenge.

EXPERT VERDICT: I see no point recommending wild yam or flaxseed – there is no published evidence of their health benefits. Flaxseed capsules contain short-chain omega-3 fatty acids, which the body is unable to metabolise (fish oils are preferable).

It is unclear why magnesium and vitamin C have been picked out separately – a good multivitamin/mineral supplement would be better and would have dealt with potential deficiencies in vitamin B12, vitamin D, calcium and iodine in someone who is dairy free. **0/10**

VIVE WELLNESS

£40.60 per month, vivewellness.com

CLAIM: Set up by two brothers in 2018 to 'cut through the confusion', these are supplied monthly in a container, designed to stand in your kitchen so you never forget to take your pills.

The prescription comes with advice on how to tweak your diet and lifestyle from a

Picture: RAIN CHANDRICK