

Help YOUR HORMONES

A well-balanced diet should provide all the nutrients we need, but supplements can be helpful, particularly at key life stages.

Louise Atkinson finds out what the experts recommend



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any dietitians argue that we don't need to take supplements when we can get all the nutrients we need from a well-balanced diet. But, let's be honest, how many of us manage to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, let alone all the other key nutrients required for optimal health? For many of us, that's why topping up our diet with vitamins and minerals in supplement form is a welcome insurance policy.

The global market in vitamin and mineral supplements is certainly booming. Each year in the UK, we spend around £442m on vitamins and minerals. Official NHS advice is restricted to taking extra vitamin D in the winter months (all adults should take 10 micrograms of vitamin D between October and early March); for vegans,

to take additional vitamin B12, iodine, selenium, calcium and iron; and those trying to get pregnant should take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily. But Dr Emma Derbyshire, a public health nutritionist and adviser for the Health and Food Supplements Information Service (hsis.org), has a more pragmatic view.

'Despite thinking we are eating a well-balanced diet, many of us fall well short of the vital daily nutrients we need to fuel our bodies,' she says, 'and there are question marks over whether soil has the nutrient quality it used to have.' An analysis of UK diet and nutrition surveys across different age groups conducted by Emma and published in 2018 found many women have lower-than-optimal levels of key ►

micronutrients, including magnesium, B vitamins, selenium, calcium, iron, potassium and iodine. She is one of many who believe it makes sense to bridge gaps with 'top up' supplements at certain life stages.

It pays to start young. The NHS recommends pre-school children take a daily supplement containing vitamins A, C and D; Emma recommends tablets in chewable or gummy form, and adds there's no need to pay premium prices - any products on sale in the UK have to pass stringent quality and safety tests. But what's the best prescription for later in life, when fluctuating metabolic and hormonal changes put extra pressure on our diet - and health? Which supplements help keep our bodies in balance?

PUBERTY

Studies show that half of all girls fall below the recommended daily intake of iron, which can cause tiredness and fatigue, says Emma. She recommends a good multivitamin and mineral formulated for teens (one example is Vitabiotics WellTeen Her, £7.50 for 30 tablets; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)). Do check that any supplements you buy contain the recommended amount of iron (shown as % RDA).

Nutritionist Rob Hobson warns that teenage girls can also be short on the B vitamins and magnesium required to support healthy skin and mood. 'Vitamin B6 is particularly useful for teenage girls affected by premenstrual syndrome (PMS),' he says, quoting a big study which showed 50-100mg daily can help ease symptoms (Vitamin B6, £11.95 for 360 tablets; [healthspan.co.uk](https://www.healthspan.co.uk)). 'Stressed teens who aren't eating properly may also benefit from a magnesium supplement; stress hormones can cause a more rapid excretion of magnesium from the system.' He says a general multivitamin and mineral supplement 'will cover all bases', but if poor sleep is an issue, extra magnesium can improve levels of a hormone called melatonin, which can boost sleep efficiency (Opti-magnesium, £11.95 for 90 tablets; [healthspan.co.uk](https://www.healthspan.co.uk)).

TRYING TO CONCEIVE

Official NHS recommendations suggest that those planning to get pregnant (and in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy) take a daily folic acid supplement (Sainsbury's Folic Acid, £1.25 for 90 tablets; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)), which reduces the risk of neural tube defects, such as spina bifida, in the unborn baby. In addition to this, Emma suggests boosting iron levels. 'Studies show a lot of women become iron deficient in the later stages of pregnancy, so it's a good idea not to go into a pregnancy running on empty.' She recommends looking for a broad 'planning to conceive' supplement, which is specially formulated to top up important nutrients (Vitabiotics Pregnacare Conception, £8 for 30 tablets; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)). Omega-3 fatty acids might also be helpful; a study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*

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in 2016 found omega-3s could boost female fertility (Sainsbury's Omega-3 Fish Oil, £12.35 for 180 capsules; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)).

Both male and female potential parents should think about making changes; a study by the University of Surrey showed that couples with a previous history of infertility who made lifestyle changes and took nutritional supplements enjoyed an 80% success rate. Nutritional health expert Dr Marilyn Glenville ([marilynglenville.com](https://www.marilynglenville.com)) says this means both partners adopting a healthy diet, and men should consider topping up their diets with a good multivitamin (Vitabiotics Wellman, £5.50 for 30 tablets; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)).

PREGNANCY

'Many of the problems associated with pregnancy are directly caused by diet or nutritional deficiencies, so it is important to maintain a state of optimum health,' says Marilyn. 'Your baby gets first call on all



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the nutrients it needs, so you need to make sure that you are feeding yourself well and taking in enough nutrients to keep yourself healthy.'

Marilyn recommends taking a multivitamin and mineral supplement as a 'foundation', and ensuring you have adequate amounts of folic acid (during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy). A broad-range multivitamin formulated for pregnancy will cover your bases (Seven Seas Pregnancy Vitamins with Folic Acid, £5 for 28 tablets; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)).

PERIMENOPAUSE

When you reach midlife, hormone levels can start to go into a state of flux, triggering early menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, mood swings, anxiety and brain fog - even if you're still regularly having periods. Make sure you're eating a well-balanced diet, says Marilyn, and supplementing with a good quality multivitamin formulated for midlife (Centrum For Women 50+, £6.75 for 30

tablets, or Seven Seas Complete Multivitamin Women 50+, £5 for 28 tablets; both [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)).

According to Rob, studies have shown that some traditional herbal remedies can also help ease symptoms. One focus of research has been isoflavones, plant versions of oestrogen shown to reduce the frequency and severity of hot flushes within 12 weeks. A menopause review from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence concluded that isoflavones, and the herb black cohosh, can be more effective than a placebo in treating hot flushes. (MenoSerene, £17.95 for a 60-day supply from [healthspan.co.uk](https://www.healthspan.co.uk), combines a multivitamin with plant oestrogens and flax, sage and soy extracts.) Sage could also help balance hormones, adds Rob; one study found sage leaf extracts reduced the frequency of mild hot flushes and stopped severe flushes altogether.

POST-MENOPAUSE

You are officially considered to be in menopause when you haven't had a period for 12 months, and from that point onwards you fall into the 'post-menopausal' category. Although the dramatic hormonal fluctuations of perimenopause should be over, you may still find yourself at the mercy of other hormonal symptoms (dryness, low libido, joint pain) and even the occasional hot flush.

Emma continues to recommend a good multivitamin targeted at the 50+ age group, with the addition of evening primrose oil or starflower oil capsules if night sweats continue to be bothersome. A 2021 trial in the *Journal of Menopausal Medicine* found 1,000mg of evening primrose oil twice daily reduced the frequency and severity of night sweats (Sainsbury's Women's Health Starflower Oil, £7 for 60 capsules; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)). And according to Marilyn, the addition of a daily omega-3 supplement could help enliven a flagging post-menopausal libido, too.

'Fats are important for overcoming low libido because sex hormones, such as testosterone, are manufactured from these fats,' she says. 'Also, fats help to keep important delicate tissues lubricated and soft.' (Seven Seas Omega-3 Fish Oil Extra Strength, £12 for 30 capsules; [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk)). ■



Advice for men

Hormone imbalances are not as prevalent in men as they are in women, but it is doubly important for men to heed the NHS recommendations for vitamin D supplementation because studies show it could help boost testosterone levels. Testosterone naturally decreases with age and low levels have been linked to health issues such as slow metabolism, reduced libido and fatigue. Research also shows that magnesium supplements (350mg daily) can help to boost testosterone levels too, particularly when coupled with exercise. Sainsbury's High Strength Vitamin D, £3.50 for 90 tablets; Sainsbury's Magnesium, 3.85 for 60 tablets; and Vitabiotics Wellman Plus, which contains both multivitamin/mineral and omega 3-6-9 capsules (£12 for 56 capsules), are all available from [sainsburys.co.uk](https://www.sainsburys.co.uk).