Alice,

I don't really understand the way daily vitamin supplements work... I take One a Day for Women. My question is, if the vitamins you take are not time released, does your body use them the way intended or are they just a waste of time? Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's easy to become confused with the whole array of dietary supplements on the shelves nowadays. One form may claim superiority in advertisements, but how are you to know for sure which ones are right for you?

First of all, vitamins and minerals are needed in our bodies in relatively small amounts. Vitamins may be present in our blood, organs, or other tissues. Although each micronutrient (scientific term for vitamins and minerals) has a specific function, here's a brief overview by category:

- **Water-soluble vitamins** (all the B vitamins and vitamin C) and many minerals act as co-enzymes, meaning they aid in chemical reactions in the body. Excessive amounts don't make reactions occur faster or more efficiently than adequate or recommended amounts. Plus, too much of one mineral may actually inhibit the absorption and effectiveness of another.
- **Fat-soluble vitamins** (vitamins A, D, E, and K) are involved in specific roles of maintenance and repair of body cells and tissues. Unlike water-soluble vitamins, extra amounts of fat-soluble vitamins are not excreted, so over-saturation of these may lead to toxicity.
- **Minerals** have a variety of functions, ranging from water and acid-base balance, to bone structure and co-enzyme activity, as mentioned before.

As long as you consume a sufficient vitamins and minerals, a constant influx is not necessary, and may also be harmful. For example, time-release niacin is not recommended because it can cause liver damage. Time-release iron supplements are ineffective because the point of release in the intestinal tract does not absorb this mineral efficiently. Some time-release supplements contain coatings that prevent the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins. As you can see, time-release nutritionals are certainly not worth the extra money manufacturers often charge for them. Besides, Mother Nature has already provided us with a way to time-release
our nutrients... by getting them from a variety of foods, eaten at various times throughout the day.

To get to your last question, you are among quite a number of men and women who have expressed concern over whether their multi-vitamin "works" or "doesn't work"; that is not really the point of these supplements. Their purpose is to help certain people fill in nutritional gaps when they are unable to eat enough food or obtain adequate vitamins and minerals from their diet. Multi-vitamins also might be recommended for some vegetarians, dieters, and others who have food allergies, intolerances, or other problems associated with eating particular foods. A supplement may benefit the elderly, too, because sometimes older people can't absorb nutrients as well as they did in their youth. Remember, the meaning of a dietary supplement is to add to a diet, not to take the place of food!

Alice!
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