

Food Supplements: What to Consider Before Taking Them

Useful for some people — but not automatically harmless

Supplements can help when there is a diagnosed deficiency, a recognised risk or a clear clinical reason. They can also interact with medicines, duplicate nutrients, cause side effects or delay investigation of symptoms. A label saying “natural” does not guarantee safety.

Begin with the reason

Before buying anything, name the problem you hope the supplement will solve. Tiredness, brain fog, hair loss, low mood and digestive symptoms can have many causes. A supplement may be irrelevant, and taking it can sometimes alter test results or mask a condition.

- Was a deficiency found through an appropriate blood test?
- Are you in a group advised to take a particular nutrient?
- Has a GP, pharmacist or registered dietitian suggested it?
- Is your intake limited by allergy, coeliac disease, ARFID, sensory needs or another condition?
- What outcome will show whether it has helped, and when will it be reviewed?

Situations where advice may be relevant

Vitamin D

UK guidance recommends a daily vitamin D supplement for some people year-round and asks everyone to consider one during autumn and winter. Needs differ with age, pregnancy, sun exposure, skin coverage, skin tone and health conditions. Check current NHS guidance for the dose that applies to you.

Pregnancy and folic acid

Folic acid is recommended before pregnancy and during early pregnancy. Some people need a higher prescribed dose because of medical history, medicines or other risk factors. Ask a GP, pharmacist or midwife rather than guessing.

Vitamin B12

People eating a vegan diet need a reliable source of vitamin B12. Low levels can also result from absorption problems or medicines. Testing and follow-up may be important because neurological effects can occur.

Iron

Do not assume tiredness means low iron. Iron can be harmful in excess and can interact with medicines. Ask about blood tests and the cause of any deficiency; treatment needs vary with results and symptoms.

More is not better

Compare the amount per daily dose with the nutrient reference value (NRV), but remember that the NRV is a labelling reference rather than a personalised prescription. High-dose products can exceed safe upper levels. Vitamins A, D, E and K are fat-soluble and can accumulate. Taking several products can unintentionally duplicate the same nutrient.

Keep a complete list

Write down every tablet, spray, powder, drink, gummy and herbal product you use, including brand, dose and frequency. Show the list to your pharmacist, prescriber and other clinicians.

Medicines and interactions

Supplements and herbal remedies may change how medicines work or increase side effects. This matters particularly with anticoagulants, antiplatelet medicines, epilepsy treatment, thyroid medicines, antidepressants, immunosuppressants and some cancer treatments. St John's wort has many important interactions. Timing can matter for iron, calcium and some medicines.

- Ask a pharmacist before combining a supplement with prescribed or over-the-counter medicines.
- Tell clinicians before surgery, dental procedures, pregnancy or breastfeeding.
- Never stop or change prescribed medicine because of supplement advice online.
- If an unexpected reaction occurs, stop the new product when safe to do so and seek advice.

Forms, ingredients and practical safety

A liquid, gummy, chewable, spray or powder may be easier than a tablet, especially with sensory or swallowing needs. The form still needs checking.

- Use the supplied measuring device; household spoons are inaccurate.
- Check serving size, concentration and whether several gummies make one dose.
- Look for sugar, sweeteners, caffeine, allergens, alcohol, gelatine and other ingredients relevant to you.
- Store out of sight and reach of children; gummies can look like sweets.
- Check the seal, expiry date, batch details and storage instructions.

Claims worth slowing down for

Be cautious with promises to “detox”, balance hormones, melt fat, cure anxiety, repair the gut or work for everyone. Testimonials, influencer codes and before-and-after stories are not reliable evidence. “Proprietary blend” wording may hide the amount of each ingredient.

Questions for a claim

- What exact ingredient and dose was studied?
- Was the research in people like me, and was the outcome meaningful?
- Was it compared with placebo or usual care?
- Who funded the study, and have findings been repeated?
- Does the seller profit from the test that supposedly proves I need the product?

Choosing a product

Buy from a reputable UK retailer or pharmacy and avoid products making medicinal claims without appropriate authorisation. Check the full label rather than relying on the front. Food supplements are regulated as foods and are not assessed in the same way as licensed medicines before sale.

- Choose the simplest product that meets the identified need.
- Avoid megadoses and unnecessary mixtures.
- Check for duplicated nutrients across multivitamins and specialist products.
- Keep the packaging in case you need the batch number.
- Report suspected side effects through the MHRA Yellow Card scheme and seek clinical advice.

ARFID, sensory needs and restricted eating

A supplement may help bridge a nutritional gap, but it should not become proof that safe foods can be removed. Consider taste, texture, smell, temperature, swallowing and routine. A registered dietitian can help identify the most achievable form and dose while protecting the foods a person can already manage.

Eating-disorder caution

Products marketed for appetite suppression, fat burning, detoxing or “compensating” for food can intensify restriction and distress. If supplements are becoming part of rules, guilt or purging, speak with an eating-disorder-informed clinician.

When assessment matters

Seek medical advice for persistent fatigue, weakness, numbness, fainting, ongoing vomiting or diarrhoea, bleeding, swallowing difficulty, unexpected weight change or symptoms that are worsening. Urgent breathing difficulty, severe swelling, collapse, confusion or a suspected dangerous overdose needs emergency help. In the UK call 999 for an emergency; NHS 111 can advise when help is urgent but not immediately life-threatening.

Before-you-buy checklist

- **Reason:** What need am I addressing, and has it been assessed?
- **Evidence:** Is there trustworthy evidence for this ingredient and dose?
- **Dose:** What is the total from every product I take?
- **Interactions:** Has a pharmacist checked my medicines and conditions?
- **Suitability:** Does it fit pregnancy, age, allergies, swallowing and sensory needs?
- **Plan:** How long will I take it, what will be monitored, and when will I review it?

Your supplement record

Product and ingredient(s): _____
 Dose and frequency: _____
 Reason for taking it: _____
 Started / review date: _____
 Prescriber or pharmacist check: _____
 Changes, benefits or side effects: _____

A message from Maggie

Supplements can feel like a simple answer when eating is difficult or symptoms are frightening. You do not have to make the decision from a place of urgency, shame or pressure. Start with the reason, ask for the checks you need, and choose the least complicated option that safely supports your nourishment.

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Further information and sources

NHS — Vitamins and minerals; Vitamin D; Vitamins, supplements and nutrition in pregnancy: [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)
 NHS — Herbal medicines and medicine interactions: [nhs.uk/conditions/herbal-medicines](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/herbal-medicines)
 GOV.UK — Food supplements guidance: [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)
 MHRA — Yellow Card reporting for suspected adverse reactions: yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk
 British Dietetic Association — Food facts and Find a Dietitian: [bda.uk.com](https://www.bda.uk.com)

Current UK guidance checked September 2026. General education only; this guide does not replace personalised medical, pharmacy or dietetic advice.