

Pass the Spinach, Please

Vitamin A is Essential to Good Health

BY KAREN BAXTER

The next time you feel a cold coming on, treat yourself to some liver, sweet potatoes or spinach with that glass of orange juice.

All three foods are rich sources of vitamin A, a nutrient, which according to a Penn State Study, may help make interferon—a natural immune-system booster produced by the body—more effective in fighting diseases like arthritis and multiple sclerosis and the common cold.

Vitamin A, a family of fat-soluble compounds, is best known for its crucial role in promoting vision, particularly night vision. But vitamin A does more than help you see in the dark. It has a host of other health benefits, from promoting bone growth to fighting acne.

Sources

Retinol—or preformed vitamin A—is one of the most active, usable forms of vitamin A and is found in animal products including liver, whole milk, eggs, margarine, cheese and in some fortified foods like cereal.

Provitamin A carotenoids, most notably beta carotene, are dark colored pigments found in plants, which the body converts to vitamin A. Carrots, spinach, kale, sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, mangoes, apricot and peaches are examples of plant foods that contain beta carotene.

Benefits

Eyes Vitamin A plays an essential role in vision by assisting in the functioning of the retina and maintaining the health of mucous membranes in the eye.

Skin Topical and oral solutions containing synthetic vitamin A (like Retin-A) are used to clear up acne and psoriasis and may be useful in treating other skin conditions like premature aging and warts. Vitamin A is also used to treat cold sores and flaky scalps.

Immune System Vitamin A has been shown to stimulate white blood cell function and increase the activity of antibodies. It also is important in the health of surface linings like those in the intestinal and respiratory tracts.



Measles The World Health Organization recommends the use of vitamin A supplements to children with measles in developing countries where vitamin A deficiency is widespread. The supplements have been shown to decrease the severity and complications of the disease.

Bones A balanced intake of vitamin A is needed for normal bone development. Both too low and too high doses have been linked to osteoporosis.

Cancer Vitamin A and beta carotene may be associated with decreased risk of certain cancers, including breast, colon and cervical cancers.

Supplements

The U.S. Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) for vitamin A for an adult is 700 to 900 micrograms of retinol or the equivalent beta carotene intake. Three ounces of cooked beef liver contain 545 percent of the RDA, while one-half cup of boiled carrots provide 270 percent.

If you obtain the suggested RDA of vitamin A from your diet, there is no need to use supplements, according to researchers. In fact, it's not a good idea to use vitamin A supplements unless directed by your doctor, especially if you

smoke or are pregnant, says Roberta Anding, a registered dietician and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

Researchers are studying a link between high doses of vitamin A and osteoporosis. Other possible risks include liver abnormalities, central nervous system disorders and even death.

"Preformed Vitamin A can be toxic at about 10 times the recommended daily allowance," Anding says. "And it can be teratogenic, meaning it can cause birth defects."

Taking a beta-carotene supplement is a safer choice than a vitamin A supplement, because it doesn't build up in the body. (Although too much can turn your skin an orange color.) Generally speaking though, a person who eats their five daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and varies their selections, shouldn't have to worry about getting enough of the nutrient.

Deficiency

Vitamin A deficiency is rare. However, Anding says she has seen it in patients who have come from developing countries or countries with widespread famine.



Approximately 250,000 to 500,000 malnourished children in developing countries go blind each year from vitamin A deficiency, according to the National Institutes of Health. Children with vitamin A deficiency are also four times more likely to have asthma and are at risk for chronic lung disease, hearing loss, measles, anemia, pneumonia and stunted growth.

In adults, vitamin A deficiency may also lead to skin, bone, lung and immunity problems and anemia, and in pregnant women, low birth weight and premature birth.

The elderly and people on low-calorie diets, vegetarian diets low in beta carotene, or people with chronic diarrhea or excess alcohol consumption are more prone to vitamin A deficiency.

Food Preparation

To ensure you're getting the most benefits out of vitamin A and beta carotene-rich foods, take measures to prevent loss of the nutrients during preparation, cooking or storage. Keep vegetables covered and refrigerated during storage. When possible, serve fruits and vegetables raw or steamed to preserve the most nutrients. In addition, baking or broiling meats is healthier than frying foods.

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