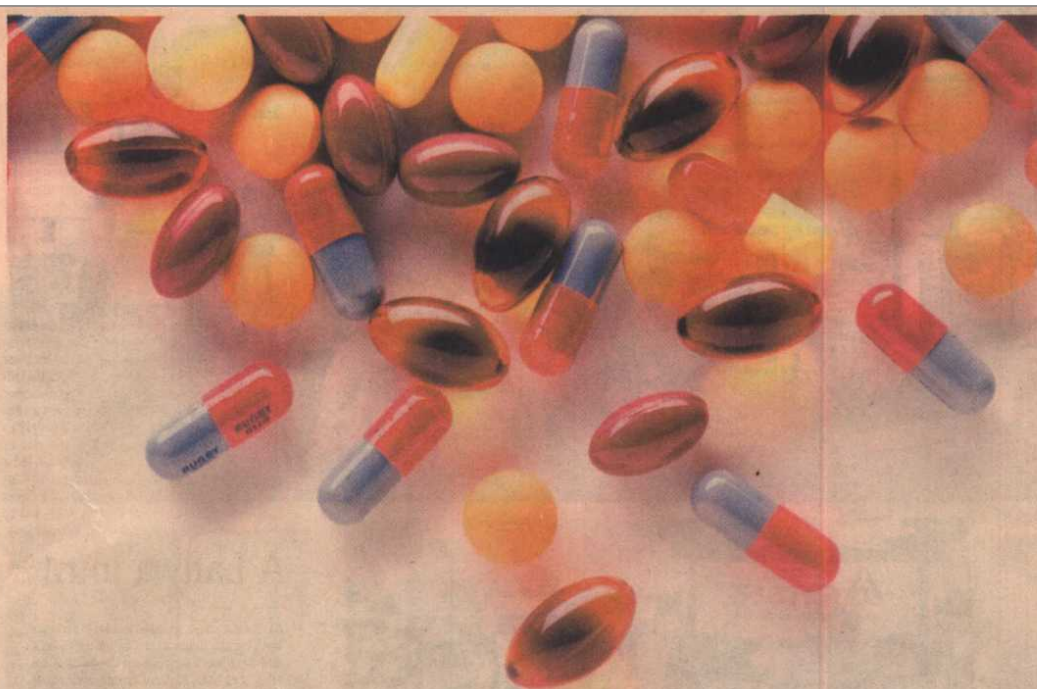


THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS



growing at 20% per annum and the biggest factor contributing to this is the rapidly increasing awareness about preventive healthcare. Today most people work long hours. It results in unhealthy eating habits — often the consumption of fast food — and stressful lifestyles. Most fast food items lack in essential vitamins and nutrients and so people feel the need to supplement their diets with vitamins and minerals," says Bill Pinckney, CEO, Amway India.

Ranging from the more common mineral and calcium supplements to the traditional remedies, now a host of dietary supplements are available in India. Others, with a healthy lifestyle, may also need supplements. "Certain essential amino acids are not formed in the body and therefore

Handful of health

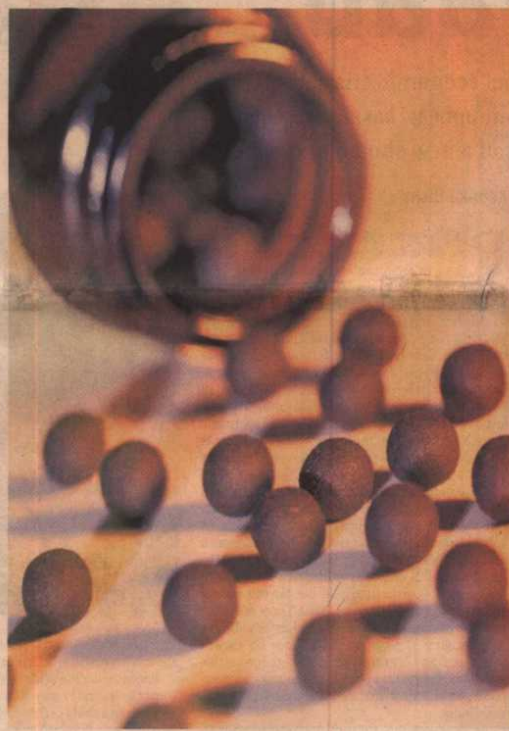
A lot of health supplements are available in the market today. But are they really safe?

Kiran Yadav

THEY are available over the counter and people pop them in by the dozen. Multivitamins, minerals, anti oxidant supplements... "I am not sure if they work, but they definitely make me feel good... I think they help me stay in control of my health," says advertising professional Prachi Vaishya.

People like Vaishya, with the few strips of multi vitamins that they consume every week, are fuelling the \$400 million food supplement and health food market in India. And she is spoilt for choice. Amway, Himalaya, Dabur, Organic India... most pharma companies offer health supplements.

"The health sector in India is



RECOMMENDED DAILY ALLOWANCE

- Calcium 1,000 mg
- Iron 18 mg
- Magnesium 400 mg
- Niacin 20 mg
- Phosphorus 1,000 mg
- Vitamin A 5,000 International units (IU)
- Vitamin D 400 IU
- Vitamin E 30 IU

Source: USFDA, Dietary Reference Intakes, National Academy of Sciences

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SUPPLEMENT FACTS

CHECK THE SUPPLEMENT LABEL Read labels carefully. Product labels can tell you what the active ingredient or ingredients are, which nutrients are included, the serving size — for example, capsule, packet or teaspoonful — and the amount of nutrients in each serving.

AVOID SUPPLEMENTS THAT PROVIDE 'MEGADOSES' In general, choose a multivitamin-mineral supplement that provides about 100% of the Daily Value (DV) of all the vitamins and minerals, rather than one which has, for example, 500% of the DV for one vitamin and only 20% of the DV for another. The exception to this is calcium. You may notice that calcium-containing supplements don't provide 100% of the DV. If they did, the tablets would be too large to swallow. More importantly, divide your calcium intake throughout the day.

LOOK FOR EXPIRATION DATES Dietary supplements can lose potency over time, especially in hot and humid climates. If a supplement doesn't have an expiration date, don't buy it. If your supplements have expired, discard them.

TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR OR A DIETITIAN Enquire which supplements and what doses might be appropriate for you. Be sure to ask about possible side effects and interactions with other medications.

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Ranging from the more common mineral and calcium supplements to the traditional remedies, now a host of dietary supplements are available in India. Others, with a healthy lifestyle, may also need supplements. "Certain essential amino acids are not formed in the body and therefore

need to be taken in the form of supplements. Also, at times the body doesn't adequately synthesise certain minerals," explains Dr Mukesh Mehra, Sr Consultant, Internal Medicine, Max Healthcare, Delhi.

However, if you're generally healthy and eat a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats, you are unlikely to need supplements. But don't forget to consult your physician before starting on any supplements. Wrong dosage and wrong combination can be harmful. Combined with over-the-counter and prescription drugs, supplements can be harmful.

"Megadoses of certain minerals and vitamins can cause toxicity. Over dose of niacin can lead to itching and headache; excess of iron can get stored in the body and result in breakdown of red blood cells; of vitamin C may result in abdominal pain and even renal stones; in high doses vitamin B 6 can cause neuro problems..." says Dr Mehra.

Lack of regulatory environment in this category is another issue that needs to be addressed. "Sometimes the supplements don't list the ingredients used. For instance, a supplement containing sodium may be harmful for a heart patient. Or a supplement containing sugar for a heart patient," says Dr Anil Saxena, Associate Director Cardiac Pacing and Electrophysiology, Escorts Heart Institute & Research Centre.

There is some saving grace here. While you must try and maintain a well-balanced diet, you can take it easy on certain counts. The body has the capacity to keep certain vitamins in store. For instance the body can keep vitamin B 12 and vitamin A in store for over an year. But the store of folic acid, thiamine can be depleted in a week's time. Calcium and phosphorus must also be consumed regularly.

Having whole food remains the safest bet. "Whole foods are the best way to obtain a variety of micro-nutrients," says dietitian Sharon Arora of G M Modi hospital. For example instead of planning to pop in vitamin C tablets to save yourself from catching a cold this winter, consider having an orange instead.

The humble orange will not only provide vitamin C, but also fibre, beta carotene, and several other nutrients.