

## MAIL TODAY

# A natural supplement is the best

If you have been advised vitamin or mineral supplements by your doctor, choose natural instead of synthetic ones as these are absorbed better

PHOTO: HAVEN JORA, MODEL: TANU ALKRETI

By MANU MOUDGIL

You are coming down with cold and your friend advises you to take lots of Vitamin C besides steam inhalation. Your colleague tells you how she relies on doses of Zinc for her health. So you rush to the chemist, where you are confronted by rows of vitamins and mineral supplements. Which to choose, you wonder? Finally you just pick one container of Vitamin C and another of Zinc, based on the assumption that all supplements are alike, and equally useful to the body. This assumption can, however, be dangerous.

The fact is that while supplements are supposed to improve our health, too many of the wrong kind can actually give rise to health problems. Vitamin E capsules have been shown to cause allergic reactions that result in breathlessness besides increasing the risk of a haemorrhage. Vitamin A gets stored in the body and can cause severe pain in the bones and joints. An overdose of calcium can also lead to anxiety, depression, personality changes, and confusion.

### ABSORPTION DIFFERS

THE REASON for these reactions is that most supplements available in market are produced synthetically from chemicals. Naturally occurring vitamins, on the other hand, are present in nature along with a supporting group of nutrients that help in their better absorption and utilisation by the body. Since we can't produce the supporting group in a laboratory, chemical supplements are devoid of these vital ingredients.

"Absorption is a problem with synthetic supplements. Since they consist of only a fraction of the natural structure, these products repair our cells and tissues only partially, unlike natural elements. Your body would need to work extra to expel unwanted elements. Side effects are also inevitable," explains Dr Pallavi Vaish, consultant nutritionist at the Healing Touch Clinic. Experts say that at the very best, synthetic supplement interacts with the human body as a mere drug but not a supporting nutrient. At worst, they can damage the functioning of the human body through biochemical imbalances. But another view is that synthetic supplements have a molecular chemical structure identical to the natural supplements and are as effective as the natural ones.

### IS IT NATURAL?

Most commercial food supplements are synthetic and are often cheaper than the natural ones.

■ If Vitamin A has come from fish oil, it's natural, but if the source is acetate or palmitate, the supplement is synthetic

■ If a Vitamin C supplement has citrus, rose hips or acerola berries as a source it's natural, but if the source is ascorbic acid, it's synthetic

■ Vitamin E can come from natural sources such as vegetable oil or wheat germ oil, but if the label lists  $\delta$ -alpha tocopherol as the source, it's synthetic

### NATURAL IS BETTER

NATURAL supplements offer a middle path, almost the equivalent of the natural vitamin sources found in food and devoid of the side effects of synthetic ones. While synthetic supplements are created in a laboratory by reconstructing molecules chemically, natural supplements are made from food concentrates like spirulina, wheat germ, barleygrass, ginkgo biloba, amla or neem.

Deepak Mehra has found the solution to his tiredness in one of these. When he consulted Dr Vaish, she recommended a natural supplement. "The normal prescription for his problem would have been supplements of Vitamin B Complex and a multi-vitamin, but I recommended Spirulina capsules instead. Spirulina is the richest natural source of protein, iron, vitamins and minerals all in one," she declares. After one and a half months of use, Deepak says he feels more energetic and less stressed.

Various companies that include Nutrilite, Himalaya Drug Company and Cosmic Nutracons have come up with natural supplements. These companies claim that no artificial colours, sweetener or preservative are used in the products. Because they are derived from natural sources, these supplements have the advantage of working in unison with the supporting group of nutrients. "Whole food concentrates work in partnership whereas synthetic ones act solo. Since human life is naturally more compatible with plants and vegetables, chemicals stand no chance in comparison," says Dr H K Chopra, senior consultant, medicine and cardiology, Moolchand Medcity. A believer in the healing power of lycopene, Dr Chopra recommends this to those with heart ailments. A chemical found in tomatoes

and other red fruit, lycopene is believed to be good for the heart and cell protection. In its natural form, it appears with four other supporting nutrients. So having it in the form of a synthetic supplement has no benefits. "These supplements don't contain the supporting nutrients so there are no evident benefits. In contrast, a natural supplement is produced by processing tomatoes and maintains the integrity of lycopene along with supporting nutrients," he says.

### BEST FROM FOOD

DOCTORS say that nutrients like vitamins and minerals are best derived directly from a balanced diet. "I would not recommend a supplement anyway since the nutrients should be derived from your diet. Coming from food, they are better absorbed by the body," says Dr M P Sharma, consultant internal medicine, Rockland Hospital. However, if you have been recommended supplementation, go for natural supplements. There are many small players in the business of natural supplements, so it's important that you buy only the products from reputed companies.

Standardisation is a major issue in the field of natural supplements. "I won't say synthetic is better than natural, but it's definitely more standardised. Nobody knows what standards the natural supplement companies are following," says Dr Sushum Sharma, head of preventive medicine, Max Healthcare. However, Dr Rangesh P R, head (new product initiatives), Himalaya Drug Company, says it is possible to standardise natural supplements. "This involves strict monitoring of quality, right from the stage of growing the herbs or plants to formulation of the finished product. For instance, a typical standardised Amla extract can have 2 per cent vitamin C. Through advanced processing mechanisms, it is possible to maintain this level of vitamin C content in the natural supplement," he says.

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### NATURAL SUPPLEMENTS



#### Himalaya Amalaki

Made from Amla or Indian gooseberry, this is a rich source of Vitamin C and other anti-oxidant polyphenols. It protects cells against free radical damage and thereby helps in the management of premature ageing. Amla extract is believed to provide effective resistance against many diseases especially of the respiratory tract.  
MRP: Rs 75



#### GNC ALFA ALFA

It is formulated from Alfa Alfa which is a herb containing Vitamins A, D, E and K as well as chlorophyll, carotene and minerals such as potassium, calcium, magnesium. It increases appetite and wards off anaemia, cleanses and detoxifies the body, cures digestive disorders and stimulates immune system besides promoting normal blood clotting.  
MRP: Rs 1,999



#### Nutrilite Natural B

It contains essential B-vitamins (B1, B2, B3, B5, B6, folic acid and B12) derived from naturally cultivated yeast that help support energy production and meet nutritional needs brought on by stressful living. B vitamins help release energy from fats, carbohydrates, and proteins in your food, keeping you in nutritional balance.  
MRP: Rs 669



#### GAIA Aloe Vera

Aloe Vera is a complex plant made up of many constituents that include vitamins, amino acids, enzymes, and mono and polysaccharides. It contains Vitamins A, B, C, E, calcium, magnesium, zinc and copper and is good for wound healing and building immunity besides being an analgesic. It also helps treat skin disorders and all hair-related problems.  
MRP: Rs 250