

Quinn on Nutrition: Vitamins—what men and women need

1 March 2019, by Barbara Quinn



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What's the difference between men's and women's multivitamins? If a woman takes a formulation designated for men, will her voice lower an octave? Will a young man's hair turn gray if he ingests a supplement for men over 50?

Maybe these dreary days of winter cause me to wonder about such things. Truth is, males and females—at certain stages of life—do have some varying nutrient needs. And if we need a multivitamin supplement (not everyone does), it helps to be guided in the right direction. But that probably doesn't mean dire consequences for a man who accidentally pops one of his wife's prenatal vitamins.

Let's start there: During pregnancy, especially in the early weeks, a woman needs additional folate—a B-vitamin vital to the formation of the fetal brain and spinal column. (We all need folate but it's especially essential during pregnancy.) Prenatal vitamins provide extra amounts of this nutrient plus more [iron](#) for the task of baby building. Some prenatal formulas also contain omega-3 fats from fish that may help with brain development.

Interestingly, although a [pregnant woman](#) needs extra calcium, many prenatal vitamins do not contain extra amounts of this mineral. That's because, during pregnancy, a woman's body can absorb twice as much calcium. So the recommendation stays the same whether a woman is pregnant or not: 1300 milligrams a day for 14-18 year old ladies; 1000 milligrams a day for women 19-50. Once a woman hits the big 51, she needs 1200 milligrams of calcium from food and supplements combined. So do men over the age of 70.

For younger women, the biggy is iron. Because of the monthly loss of this mineral through the [menstrual cycle](#), young ladies need more iron than men from the age of 14 to 50, according to the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans. As she approaches menopause, a [woman](#) needs less iron. Multivitamin/mineral formulas for [older women](#) may supply half the iron of other preparations. And many vitamin/mineral supplements for older men have no extra iron at all due to the risk for some men to accumulate excess amounts of this mineral.

Most of our nutrient needs stay fairly stable over the years. For example, from age 14 on, healthy boys and girls, men and women all need similar daily doses of potassium, vitamin E and selenium. And men generally need slightly higher amounts of vitamin C, zinc and certain B-vitamins than women.

Vitamin D is another nutrient with the same dosage recommendation for all of us until the age of 70. After that, our skin is less able to convert sunshine to vitamin D (and we probably aren't outdoors as much). That's why [vitamin](#) formulations for older individuals may contain extra amounts of this nutrient.

Confused? Maybe that's why some manufacturers now market sex- and age-related multivitamins.

Dosages can still vary, however. Stick with reliable well-known brands.

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