

Thinking outside the pill

Local dietitian weighs in on staying healthy without lots of vitamin supplements

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So you've decided to change your ways. The excesses of the holidays have taken a toll on your waistline, energy stores and clothing comfort level. It's time to undo some of that bad judgment by eating better and exercising more.

Fortunately, success involves little more than common sense, and that includes the eating part. Although nutritional-supplement purveyors might have you believe otherwise, Naperville registered dietitian and author **Christine Palumbo** says it's entirely possible -- and, in fact, preferable -- to derive a fully balanced diet without popping a lot of vitamins, minerals and other surrogate nutrition available in pill form.

"If you think about it, centuries ago there were no vitamin supplements, and the human race was designed to survive on the naturally occurring plant and animal foods," Palumbo said. "The key to enjoying good health, both in the here and now and in your future, is to seek out and enjoy a nice selection or 'variety' of foods. That is a way to ensure proper nourishment for your body."

That doesn't mean taking vitamins is ill-advised. They can be quite helpful for ensuring that you're taking in adequate supplies of nutrients that can be hard to get strictly from food, such as vitamin D, calcium and iron. But generally, supplements are best approached as a safety net.

"The key is to remember that it is a supplement to, and not a substitute for, a healthy diet," Palumbo said. "It's not a bad idea to take a general multivitamin. It can be regarded as an insurance policy. For the most part, most of our nutrients are available through a well-balanced diet."

Particularly in the wake of the holiday gluttony, enticements for magic-bullet weight loss plans are plentiful. The advice is time-tested and well taken: let the buyer beware. Use your head. If it seems too good to be true, that's probably the case. The same caveat applies to the one-stop wonder food idea.

"We hear so much about so-called super fruits or super foods or the 'top 10,' or 'look for certain colors,' (or) very expensive, foreign-raised fruit juice. People think that's the way to go, that's how to ensure proper nutrition," Palumbo said.

Sometimes the best things to include in the diet are those right under your nose. Palumbo cited orange juice as an example, noting that the frozen concentrate form is the most inexpensive. She

also pointed out that its compact size, which requires less fuel as it is shipped to the consumer and leaves a smaller package to discard, gives it a green edge over reconstituted versions.

"It provides enormous nutrient benefits, beyond just vitamin C," said Palumbo, noting that potassium and antioxidants are among its additional virtues. "I am a huge fan. Just a juice glass full, six to eight ounces, provides plenty of nutrition. It's good-tasting."

It's not especially newsworthy that you need to eat your vegetables. There are good reasons, though, for making sure you dip into an assortment of sources, including potatoes, cabbage, beans, broccoli, carrots, onions and mushrooms, among others.

"Eat a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, in all the color groups -- including winter whites," Palumbo said, citing onions, garlic, Belgian endive, cauliflower and jicama. "Don't disregard vegetables and fruits that are not brightly colored, because the so-called white vegetables pack a powerful nutritional punch as well."

One thing you probably don't need to worry about is protein. It's important for cell regeneration and other crucial processes, but the Western diet doesn't tend to be sparse in that area.

"There are what we traditionally think of as protein-rich foods, such as poultry, meat, fish, beans, eggs, but remember that many other foods provide small amounts of protein that add up over time," she said, adding that whole grains and vegetables also furnish the nutrient. "Most of us are getting more protein than we realize."

If you plan to get back into those skinny jeans after the year-end eating binge, it will help to increase your activity level a bit. But don't avoid food, Palumbo advised. Just eat less of it.

"After the holidays people naturally turn to resolutions and trying to undo the excesses of the holidays," she said. "One good way to do that is to just reduce what they eat by about one-third."