

# Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

## SUPPLEMENTS: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

In a perfect world, everyone would know exactly what and how much to eat for both optimal health and peak performance. Unfortunately ours is not a perfect world and most of us are left on our own to decipher the implications of current research findings or the latest nutritional fad. If you feel awash in a sea of confusion and contradictions, you're not alone. Here's some advice to help you navigate the murky waters of the million-dollar supplement industry.

### **SUPPLY AND DEMAND**

Certainly there is no end to the number of products or corresponding manufacturers' claims of improved performance, faster weight loss and quicker muscle gain. Unfortunately, there are no established guidelines governing these products, which means companies are not required to offer proof to substantiate their claims.

Supplement manufacturers have promoted many types of bizarre ingredients and concoctions. Some of the most widely used products include individual amino acids, antioxidant vitamins and trace minerals such as chromium picolinate. While all supplements have the potential to do harm, some are more risky than others.

### **AMINO ACID ANGST**

One of the most questionable supplementation practices is the use of individual amino acids. Amino acids are nitrogen-containing components that make up proteins. Approximately 22 amino acids exist in nature, eight or nine of which must be present in our diet because our bodies cannot manufacture them. There is no evidence that healthy individuals will

benefit from large doses of a single amino acid. In fact, imbalanced amino acid diets created in the laboratory are associated with anti-nutritional effects such as depressed growth. Allergies, headaches and altered neural functioning also are associated with single amino acid supplementation. Thus, your best bet is to obtain amino acids through protein in your diet.



### **GETTING ENOUGH OF WHAT YOU NEED**

Unlike using amino acids, taking moderate quantities of antioxidant vitamins is considered a low-risk practice. Vitamins E and C and one of the vitamin A precursors, beta-carotene, along with a diet rich in antioxidant-containing foods, may help the body get rid of harmful oxidants that can damage cells. The key here is that antioxidants must be taken in conjunction with a healthy diet containing lots of fruits, vegetables and beans. Research studies using antioxidants in the form of supplements have not been consistently positive. Eating several servings of fruits and vegetables every day, however, has been associated with a lower risk of heart disease and cancer in numerous studies.

### **THE CHROMIUM CRAZE**

Chromium picolinate has been so widely promoted as the quick way to a leaner, more muscular body that many consumers just assume that there is good evidence to support those claims. Actually, no such evidence exists, and there is no indication that chromium deficiency is prevalent among healthy adults in our population. It is true that chromium is often lost in the processing of foods; this is another reason why our diets should contain many whole, unprocessed foods. However, for those who insist on taking chromium picolinate, the estimated safe and adequate daily intake is 50 mcg to 200 mcg.

### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Americans seem to be married to the idea that in order to achieve our goals, we must consume special dietary products in amounts not normally found in a typical diet. But while the initial promises offered by makers of these supplements are often enchanting, the actual benefits to the consumer don't necessarily live up to the advertising. The best defense against becoming a victim of a nutritional scam is education. With this formidable weapon, you will be well on your way toward better health.

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