

Guidelines for Using Vitamin, Mineral, and Herbal Supplements

- **Learn about the supplements you are interested in taking.** Know the name, amounts, and effects of products you use.
- **Discuss supplements with your doctor.** Tell your health care provider about all of the medicines, herbal products, and supplements you take.
- **Keep records.** Record the doses, date started, and side effects of any supplement you use. Note your blood sugar levels while using the supplement and the effects of the supplement. Did it work?
- **Know what benefits to expect.** Long-term use of most supplements is not recommended. If a supplement is not working, stop taking it.
- **Add only one new product at a time.** It is easier to track effects if you take only one supplement at a time. If you use more than one or a combination formula, check labels to ensure that you do not exceed total dosage guidelines for individual substances.
- **Carefully follow dosage guidelines on labels.** To be cautious, start with a half dose, working up to a full dose over a week or more. Do not take greater amounts than recommended.
- **Do not combine supplements and prescription drugs without your doctor's knowledge.** Many supplements can change the way medicines work. In some cases, serious side effects can occur.
- **Never stop taking a prescribed drug without your doctor's knowledge.** Many supplements are unproven. They are not a substitute for prescription drugs you may be using.
- **Stop using supplements and contact your doctor if you notice bad side effects.** Side effects from supplements can be very serious.
- **Do not use supplements if you are pregnant or nursing or give them to young children.** The effects of many of these products on fetuses and children are not known.
- **Stop using all supplements (or check with your doctor) before surgery, anesthesia, and other medical procedures.** Several herbs can decrease the body's ability to form blood clots and could be dangerous. Others can alter the effects of anesthesia or lead to seizures.
- **Store capsules and tablets in a cool dark place at home.** Fresh herbs can be frozen in airtight containers; capsules and tablets should not be frozen.

How to Choose a Supplement

- Look for nationally known food and supplement companies.
- Look for products that have recognized symbols of quality, such as the USP, NF, TruLabel, or ConsumerLabs symbol.
- Avoid foreign products unless quality is known. Foreign products, especially those from China and India, are more likely to have dangerous contaminants.
- Avoid companies that make sensational claims or have misleading labeling.
- Look for products that have standardized extracts. Labels should clearly identify the quantities of active ingredients.
- Look for products that have an expiration date.
- Look for products that provide a toll-free customer service phone number. Call and ask if their products undergo outside testing or if there are any published studies supporting their use.

