



Filling the Food

gap

How vitamins,
supplements, and
probiotics can
improve your child's
health

by Denise Schipani

Collectively, adults spend billions of dollars a year on vitamins, herbs, and other dietary supplements. But the question is, should we give them to our kids? If you ask pediatrician and author William Sears, M.D., the answer is a qualified yes. While it would be ideal if children got all the vitamins and minerals they need from their diets, realistically, very few kids have anywhere near perfect diets—despite a parent's best efforts. Multivitamins, then, according to Dr. Sears, are necessary gap-fillers for most kids. But there's another dietary supplement that he says is even more essential: omega-3 fatty acids (found in fish oil). And then there are probiotics—good bacteria that can help keep a child's intestines in good working order, keep bad bacteria at bay, and boost overall health by pumping up

the immune system. Read on to learn more about the "little extras" that Dr. Sears says nearly every child should have.

PARENT & CHILD: Many adults pop a multivitamin daily. Should kids, too?

WILLIAM SEARS: Growing children need more vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients per pound of body weight than adults, but ironically, kids are less likely than adults to get what they need from the food they eat. It's my feeling that most children over age 2 need a multivitamin as a nutritional insurance policy against the standard American diet, which is often atrocious.

P&C: Can't parents simply give their kids a multivitamin to make up for a poor diet?

DR. SEARS: You still need to make every effort to help your child get the nutrients he needs from his food. One reason is that many nutrients are absorbed better from food than from pills. A second reason is that there are literally hundreds of substances in nutritious foods that boost health in ways that we have yet to fully understand.

P&C: What are the main vitamins and minerals that kids tend to miss out on that a kids' multivitamin can help replace?

DR. SEARS: Because kids today spend so much time indoors, they may not get the vitamin D they need. Our bodies require sunlight in order to make it. Most children in this country don't get enough vitamin C or E, either. They're lacking in calcium, iron, and other minerals. Drinking too many sugary beverages can rob their bodies of the limited amount of calcium they do take in.

P&C: Should kids take any dietary supplements besides a multivitamin?

DR. SEARS: If I had to choose one supplement that all young kids should take, it would be an omega-3 supplement. Omega-3s are important fatty acids that promote brain growth, and when you consider how rapidly the brain grows during the first 5 years of life, you realize how vital this is. Yet most American children are deficient in omega-3 fats, because they are primarily

found in cold-water fish like salmon, and not a lot of kids—or families!—eat salmon frequently enough. As a supplement, then, parents should buy mercury-free fish oil capsules or liquids made for kids. If your child won't or can't swallow it, open it up and mix the contents with food.

P&C: Probiotics have been popular in Europe for decades, but they're fairly new in this country. What are they?

DR. SEARS: Probiotics are healthy bacteria that normally reside in our intestines, right alongside unhealthy bacteria. Basically, our intestinal health relies on a favorable balance between good and bad bacteria—or, as I like to say, the right balance of bugs. Probiotics, in return for the nice, warm place to live and food to eat, do nice things for your gut. The more of them there are, the fewer bad guys there are—they literally crowd out harmful bacteria.

P&C: In terms of specifics, what can probiotics do for your child's health?

DR. SEARS: Let's say I prescribe an antibiotic for your child for an ear infection. The drug will kill the infection-causing bacteria, but it'll also kill off the good bacteria in the body, which is why a child on antibiotics often suffers stomach upset, irregularity, or constipation. So I'll tell the parent to give the child a probiotic supplement along with the antibiotic, to replenish the good germs that have been destroyed and to restore intestinal health. In addition, probiotics can help hasten the recovery from intestinal illnesses, which are common among kids. It's also been proven that probiotics can lessen the chance your child will get allergic illnesses like asthma or eczema.

Finally, giving your child a probiotic supplement when she's healthy can keep her that way. People are surprised to learn that 70 percent of your immune health is based in the intestinal tract. **P&C**

Denise Schipani writes about parenting, health, and fitness issues.

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