

## Get antioxidants from food and not from supplements!

In our fast paced society with an increased availability of convenience foods and ready-made-meals, buying and cooking healthy food is becoming a challenge. We land up worrying about whether we are getting adequate amounts of vitamins and minerals. In an attempt to keep ourselves and our families healthy, we tend to turn to quick fixes and start popping various concoctions of supplements, including antioxidants. Is this the answer and are supplements safe?

### Antioxidants and supplements

Antioxidants are substances that can protect us from damage caused by free radicals, which are produced in the human body as part of its normal metabolic processes. They include various vitamins (A, C, E), minerals (copper, zinc, selenium) and vitamin-like substances such as ubiquinones and bioflavonoids. Our bodies produce a certain amount of antioxidants, but during times of illness and extreme stress we need more than can be manufactured to be able to cope with the increased production of free radicals. However, if you follow a healthy, balanced diet including a variety of foods - you should be able to meet your antioxidant needs and it will not be necessary to take a supplement.

### Should you supplement or not?

Recent studies have shown that antioxidant supplements are not only ineffective but they could also be dangerous. The key findings show that antioxidants, especially high-dose single supplements could increase the risk of death. Single nutrient supplements are thus not recommended for the general healthy individual. Bear in mind that there is a place for nutrient supplements, but it should only be necessary for certain people with specific needs and confirmed dietary deficiencies.

If you think you need antioxidant supplements, consider this first:

- Do you eat a healthy balanced diet including all food groups? If you exclude major food groups from your diet (e.g. fruit and veggies, dairy or animal meats) - consult a dietician about the adequacy of your diet and to determine the need for a supplement.
- If you do want to supplement, rather choose a multi-vitamin/mineral that provides 100% of the RDA (Recommended Dietary Allowance) or not more than 2-3 times the RDA.
- Avoid large doses of single vitamins or minerals unless you have a specific need or deficiency that has been confirmed by your healthcare professional.
- If you take supplements for long periods of time ask your specialist to reassess your need for them.
- Report any adverse effects that may be linked to the supplements to your doctor.

### Getting antioxidants from food

Although supplementation with antioxidants is not advised to prevent cardiovascular disease, the scientific evidence supports a diet high in food sources of antioxidants. To obtain an adequate intake of antioxidants, it is thus safer to eat a variety of fruit and vegetables, whole grains and nuts. Here are some foods that are rich in antioxidants:

- **Vitamin C** - citrus fruits, tomatoes, guava, peppers, cabbage, strawberries, potato and kiwi
- **Vitamin E** - wheatgerm, vegetable oils, green leafy vegetables, milk, egg yolk and nuts
- **Carotenoids** (beta carotene, Vitamin A) - liver, milk, egg yolk, green-, orange- and yellow fruit and vegetables (spinach, carrots, sweet potato, mango and apricots)
- **Ubiquinones** (coenzyme Q10) - fish oil, nuts and fish
- **Bioflavonoids** - citrus fruit, berries, cherries, red cabbage, grapes and red wine
- **Selenium** - Brazil nuts, seafood, meat, poultry and organ meats (liver, kidneys)

- **Copper** - organ meats, shellfish, nuts, seeds and cocoa
- **Zinc** - oysters, red meat, liver, dried beans and nuts

For more information on general heart health contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 for advice from registered dieticians, email [heart@heartfoundation.co.za](mailto:heart@heartfoundation.co.za) or visit [www.heartfoundation.co.za](http://www.heartfoundation.co.za).

**Written by Erika Ketterer, Registered Dietician at The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA.**