**The 3 nutrients women need most for optimal health**

We’re zoning in on vitamins and minerals that are especially important at times of a woman’s life.

Opting for a variety of nutrient-dense foods daily should provide you with the micronutrients your body needs, says Head of Wellness at Vitality South Africa, Dr Mosima Mabunda. Choose the healthy options from the following food groups:

* Colourful vegetables and fruits — plain fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables are your best choice.
* Whole grain and high fibre carbohydrates, including brown rice, bulgur wheat, oats and popcorn kernels.
* Proteins, such as legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas), skinless chicken, ostrich, fish (prioritising omega 3 rich options) and eggs.
* Healthy fats from foods such as olive, avocado or canola oil, avocado, and raw unsalted nuts and seeds.
* Lower fat dairy products including unsweetened milk and yoghurt.

However, the following nutrients require special attention as they can fall short of a women’s daily requirements.

1. **Iron**

Iron is one of the keys to good health and optimal energy levels for pre-menopausal women. Essential for healthy blood cells, iron becomes especially important when girls start to menstruate. [Women between the ages of 19 and 50 need approximately 18 mg a day, and in pregnancy this increases to 27 mg a day](https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Iron-HealthProfessional/). The volume of blood almost doubles when women are pregnant, which increases the demand for iron.

Foods that are good sources of iron include beef, lamb, pork, chicken, liver, shellfish, fish, eggs (particularly the egg yolk), tofu, quinoa, spinach, beans, lentils and some fortified ready-to-eat cereals. The iron from animal products (haeme iron) is more easily absorbed. To enhance the absorption of iron from plant sources (non-haeme iron), pair them with a food high in vitamin C — such as strawberries, oranges, papaya or guavas.

Over time, if you aren't getting enough iron from your diet, or if you are losing too much iron, such as through heavy periods, an iron deficiency can occur. The symptoms of iron deficiency (anaemia) can include tiredness, shortness of breath, and heart palpitations, among others. If you’re vegan or a vegetarian, eat enough beans and lentils, spinach, tomatoes and other iron-rich plant foods, and consider taking an iron supplement.

1. **Calcium (and Vitamin D)**

Getting enough calcium is important for all ages, but it's particularly important for young women during adolescence and early adulthood, when we build bone density, as well as for postmenopausal women. Calcium keeps bones strong and helps to reduce the risk for osteoporosis, a bone disease in which the bones become weak and break easily.

[Experts recommend 1 300 mg of calcium a day for girls aged 9 to 18, and 1 000 mg to 1200 mg a day for adult women.](https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/Calcium-HealthProfessional/) That’s about three cup-equivalents of calcium-rich foods daily. Calcium-rich foods include low-fat or fat-free milk, or calcium-fortified non-dairy milk like soy milk, yoghurt and cheese, canned sardines, pilchards, or salmon with soft bones and calcium-set tofu.

Here are some ideas for including more calcium-rich foods in your daily diet:

* + - * Make a [breakfast smoothie](https://www.discovery.co.za/portal/individual/breakfast-smoothies) by blending fruit and yoghurt or milk together.
      * Cook oats in milk instead of water.
      * Drink a glass of milk with a meal or in between as a snack.
      * Yoghurt mixed with cut fresh fruit, nuts, and seeds makes a quick calcium-rich snack.
      * Make a healthy “chocolate” milkshake by blending plain milk, fresh banana, and a little cocoa powder together.

Enough vitamin D is also important to enhance the absorption of calcium in your body, so get some sunshine each day. Apart from being exposed to sunlight, good sources of vitamin D include fatty fish, such as pilchards and salmon, eggs and fortified foods.

If you are pregnant, breastfeeding or unable to have a regular intake of dairy products, you may need to consider taking a daily calcium supplement.

1. **Omega-3s**

These essential fatty acids, EPA and DHA, play many important roles in the body, including building healthy brain and nerve cells. They are critical for a healthy metabolism, but they’re not produced by the body, so it’s important that you get enough omega-3 fatty acids through the foods you eat.

For pregnant women, [studies](https://www.cochrane.org/news/new-research-finds-omega-3-fatty-acids-reduce-risk-premature-birth) have shown that omega-3s can help prevent preterm births. Even women who don't plan to have children should be sure to get enough omega-3s, as these healthy fats have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease.

To meet your omega-3 fat requirements, you need to eat at least one portion of [oily fish](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-types/fish-and-shellfish-nutrition/) a week. This includes pilchards, sardines, herring, salmon and mackerel which are high in omega-3 fatty acids. One portion of oily fish is around 140 g when cooked. Try this [rainbow trout ceviche with pomegranate guacamole](https://www.discovery.co.za/portal/individual/rainbow-trout-ceviche) for something different.

If you don't eat oily fish, consider taking an omega-3 (fish oil) supplement. For vegans, marine algae supplements are available.

**Getting your vitamins and minerals in food form is always best**

“For the general population, getting your vitamins and minerals in food form is always best because the balance between vitamins and minerals play a big role in their efficacy,” says Dr Mabunda.

Thankfully, you don't have to worry about knowing exactly which supplements to consume with what for best results, because “healthy foods already package an ideal mix of different vitamins and minerals,” she adds. Just eat a variety of nutrient-rich foods of different colours, and you’ll likely be covered!