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Does everyone really need health supplements?

S'poreans spent S\$594m on vitamins and health supplements last year

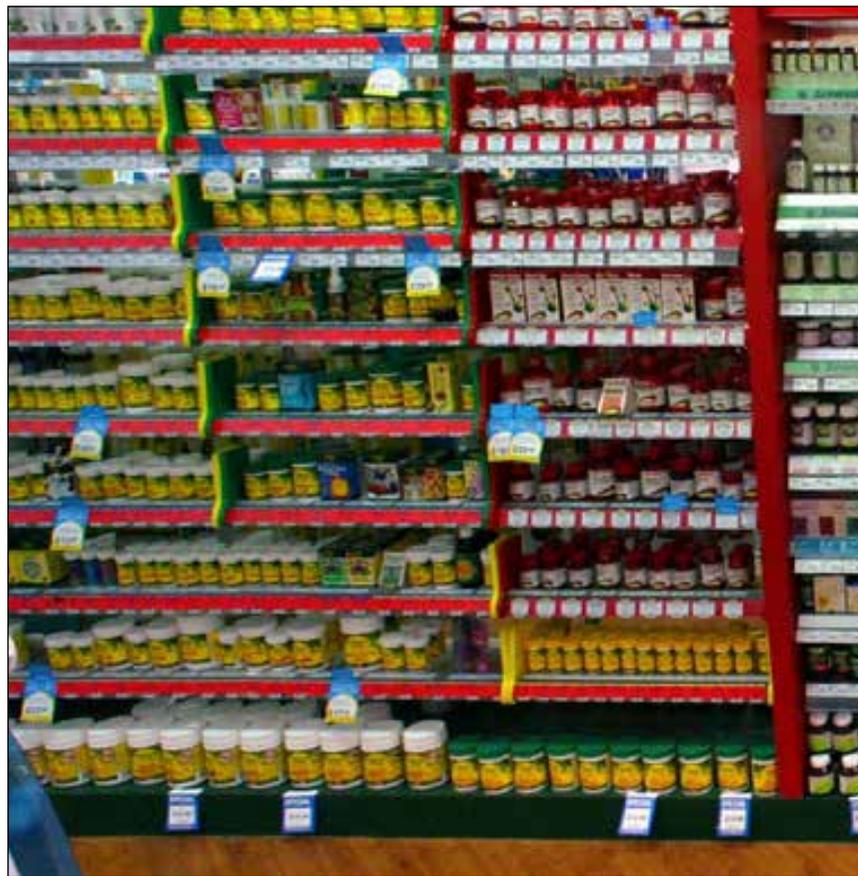
EVELINE GAN
eveline@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – In the hope of enhancing her general health, Madam Susan Tan has been taking a multivitamin and fish oil supplement every day for the last three years. The manager, who

is in her 40s and does not have any chronic illness, said she feels more alert and falls sick less frequently after taking them.

“I don’t always eat well due to my hectic work schedule. If I can get my vitamins quickly and easily from a pill, why not? I hope that the extra health boost can keep me healthy and prevent illnesses as I age,” she said.

Latest figures from the Health Supplements Industry Association of Singapore (HSIAS), which represents over 90 per cent of the health supple-



Singaporeans spend big on vitamins and health supplements, with multivitamins, calcium and Vitamin C pills among the most popular sold. PHOTO: REUTERS

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EVIDENCE OF BENEFITS WHEN NEEDED

“According to Ms Lynette Goh, senior dietitian at National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, there is some scientific evidence to show that supplements may help manage some conditions. But she added that there is not enough evidence to suggest that healthy people benefit from taking supplements.

ments marketed here, show that many Singaporeans share Mdm Tan’s sentiments.

It estimates that Singaporeans spent about S\$594 million on supplements last year, a figure that is expected to increase 8 to 10 per cent annually, said the association’s president, Mr Daniel Quek, who added that multivitamins, calcium and Vitamin C pills are among the most popular supplements sold here.

TO SUPPLEMENT OR NOT TO SUPPLEMENT?

Popping a pill seems like a convenient way to boost health and ward off certain diseases. But does the average person really need a health supplement?

Ms Louisa Zhang, a nutritionist in private practice, said a multivitamin may be considered by those who wish to make up for any nutrition shortfalls. But it has to be sourced from a reliable company with a good track record, and taken according to the recommended dosage.

When used appropriately, Mr Quek said, health supplements can be a “low cost” way to maintain health and reduce risks of chronic health conditions. According to Ms Lynette Goh,

senior dietitian at National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, there is some scientific evidence to show that supplements may help manage some conditions. They include calcium and Vitamin D to improve bone health, folic acid to reduce risk of birth defects and Omega-3 fatty acids to improve heart health.

But she added that there is not enough evidence to suggest that healthy people benefit from taking supplements. “They are meant to fill in nutritional gaps in certain situations when the person is not eating well. In such cases, a doctor will be able to advise and prescribe the right supplements to meet those nutritional gaps based on clinical findings or medical judgment,” said Ms Goh.

For instance, supplements can help people with chronic diseases, food allergies and intolerances, as well as those recovering from surgery, illness or those who are on a restrictive diet, meet their nutritional needs.

Vegans and vegetarians who have a limited diet, women who intend to conceive or are already pregnant, and older adults who are not eating well may also benefit.

A spokesperson from the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) said sup-

* CHOOSING THE RIGHT SUPPLEMENT

● Researchers from the University of Auckland's Liggins Institute rocked the supplement industry last year when their new study claimed that many fish oil supplements sold in New Zealand and Australia contain less than two-thirds of the Omega-3 fatty acids listed on their labels.

The study, published in the Scientific Reports last year, also found levels of oxidation in the fish oil products, which can be harmful.

While the Omega-3 Centre, Australian and New Zealand authority on long-chain Omega-3s, as well as other industry experts, have since refuted the study, saying it was flawed due to non-standard procedures the researchers used, the issue of inaccurate labelling is not unheard of in the supplement industry.

According to Ms Jacqueline Wee, pharmacist and sole distributor in Singapore of WHC Nutrogenics, laboratory tests by supplement watchdogs in the United States have also found inaccurate labelling in certain brands of fish oils, probiotics, protein supplements and herbal supplements.

"Although the reports of mislabelling are from overseas, some of the products tested and mentioned to be inaccurately labelled are brands sold in Singapore too," said Ms Wee.

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) advises consumers to buy health supplements from reliable sources like a pharmacy or an established retail store. But with health supplements currently not subjected to pre-market approval by the authorities, how can consumers make an informed decision when buying them?

Experts offer these tips:

Look for seals or awards for quality. Seals awarded by scientific research will weigh more than a seal awarded by say, consumer satisfaction which may be subjective, said Ms Wee.

Read the fine print on labels. Ms Wee advised taking note of the serving size and amount of active ingredients per pill or capsule. Scrutinise the content per pill as it can vary with different brands. According to Ms Wee, certain types of supplements like fish oil and probiotics are more sensitive to stress from manufacturing environment conditions. A responsible manufacturer will share details on how the raw materials are handled during processing and how the end-product is kept fresh, she said.

Exercise caution. This is especially so for health supplements that are promoted to improve lifestyle-related problems like weight loss, anti-ageing and sexual function enhancement, said the HSA's spokesperson.

Avoid products with exaggerated claims. Health supplements are not evaluated by the HSA and claims like "clinically tested" and "scientifically proven" may not be adequately supported.

Check with a doctor or pharmacist before taking any supplements. Some supplements may be unsuitable for people taking certain medications or have certain medical conditions.

Buy from reliable sources such as a pharmacy or established retail store. Avoid buying from unknown websites, online discussion forums, blogs and street peddlers, advised the HSA.

More information on the use and purchase of health supplements can be found at www.hsa.gov.sg.

risk if kidney stones, nausea, loss of appetite, constipation and impair iron absorption," she said.

Unlike with medication, Ms Goh added there are also no guarantees on ingredient quality, purity or safety of supplements as they are currently imported and sold without a licence, approval or registration by HSA.

The HSA has a post-market surveillance framework to detect adverse events associated with health products, but importers, wholesale deal-

ers and manufacturers are responsible for ensuring safety and quality of their products.

Its spokesperson said: "Even with regulatory oversight, there is no guarantee that all health supplements in the market are 100 per cent safe. All health products carry varying degrees of risk when consumed or used."

That is why it is important for consumers to learn to differentiate between marketing hype and objective facts on product labels (see Choosing

the Right Supplement), said Ms Wee.

Even if you choose to take a supplement, Ms Zhang said nothing can replace nutrients from whole foods.

Ms Goh added: "Wholefoods provide a variety of vitamins and minerals that work together to protect and promote health. In addition, fruit, vegetables and wholegrains also provide fibre, which helps prevent certain chronic diseases like Type 2 diabetes and heart disease, that supplements don't."

● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

plements should not replace any prescribed treatment or medication from a doctor, nor can it treat or manage a medical condition.

Pharmacist Jacqueline Wee, sole distributor in Singapore of WHC Nutrogenics, added that consumers must first determine the reasons for taking supplements.

"Supplements cannot claim to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any diseases. People who have food allergies, chronic medical conditions or take multiple medications should always consult their doctor or pharmacist before taking a supplement," she said.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

It is also possible to have too much of a good thing, especially when specific nutrients are taken in large doses. Ms Goh warned that taking extra vitamins may result in an overdose if the person's diet also concentrates on particular foods containing the same nutrients.

"For example, taking too much calcium from supplements, in addition to calcium-rich foods, can increase the

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