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6 Factors That Affect How Well (And Quickly) Your Supplement Will Work

We're living in a pretty amazing time when it comes to health and wellness. Even compared to just a few years ago, the number of healthy options we have in mainstream grocery stores, airports, and online is nothing short of impressive. This increased access has a lot of benefits, but it can also leave us feeling overwhelmed with options and with a medicine cabinet full of supplements that we tried for a couple of weeks and then abandoned. Can you relate? Don't worry, you're not alone.

Because of this, two of the top questions I get asked online and at my functional medicine center are "Will this supplement really work?" and "How long will it take to notice a difference?" And they're great questions! Who the heck wants to take, and pay for, something if it's not working? Who doesn't want to know what to expect and, ultimately, when they can start benefiting from their healthy intentions? Well, allow me to introduce you to the six factors I consider when I manage my patients' supplement regimens:



1. Your starting point

The first factor to consider when estimating how long it will take for you to feel different from taking a supplement is where your health was when you started it. All my patients are at different points in their wellness journey. For example, if your vitamin D or magnesium levels were really low when you starting taking vitamin D or magnesium, it's going to take longer for you to start seeing improvements than the person who just had a slight deficiency.

2. Dosage

The next thing to consider is how much of a supplement you are taking. This is also tied to your starting baseline. I often see well-intentioned health seekers taking the right supplement but not taking enough for their issue. This leaves them feeling frustrated that they don't feel any better, so they end up stopping the supplement. Sadly, if they were just taking a high enough dose for it to be clinically beneficial, they likely would have seen an improvement! This is why it's always a good idea to work with a qualified medical practitioner to find out what dose is right for you (because it is possible to take too much of a supplement as well) so that you don't waste your time and so you can stay safe and start benefiting as soon as possible.

3. Quality

The expansion of the wellness world is exciting, but it also can be overwhelming. Whole shelves devoted to the same kind of vitamin or herb can leave anyone feeling confused about which one is the best. A good rule is this: Treat buying a new supplement as if you were hiring a new employee. This means you need to vet it and do a background check. Read the label, look for any fillers or strange ingredients—like sugar, rice flour, or artificial colors—and consider both the potency and quality of the active ingredients. It might even behoove you to do a little independent research on the brand and their reputation in the space. If this feels overwhelming, ask your doctor or an R.D. for red flags to look out for or to recommend specific brands.

4. Your individual needs

Just because a certain herbal blend worked for a friend doesn't mean it's right for you. We're all different, and we all have different needs! Even if an issue seems the same to an untrained eye, an expert is likely to take a unique approach for each person. I might sound like a broken record by now, but this is another reason that it's a great idea to work with a professional who has experience with supplements. If you are going it alone, check out my supplement and adaptogen guides to narrow down what might be best for you.

5. Absorption rate

An often-overlooked issue to consider when determining how long to try a supplement is your body's ability to actually absorb and use the nutrients inside the capsule. Many people have underlying gut problems that can inhibit their ability to fully benefit from a supplement. This also goes for systemic inflammation, which can inhibit cellular absorption of nutrients. If your body is not effectively absorbing nutrients, it can take a lot longer to notice improvements from supplements; in fact, you might not notice any changes at all until you deal with the underlying gut or inflammatory problem—which, again, will involve talking to your doctor about any issues you're experiencing, and letting them know you want to incorporate supplements into your health regimen.

6. Food

You can't supplement your way out of a poor diet, plain and simple. If you're eating nutrient-poor foods but taking an herbal elixir, it's like a drop of clean water in a murky ocean, and it's very likely that whatever ailment you're trying to fix will stick around. With that said, I am not talking about food perfection. Just remember that food comes first and supplements should be the targeted tools to take your wellness game to the next level.

So with all these factors taken into consideration, on average how long does it take to notice improvements from taking a supplement? In my clinical experience seeing thousands of patients over the years, the average person will notice a difference anywhere from one day in to four or eight weeks in—depending on how deficient you were in the first place. If you're not seeing any results after eight weeks, it's generally time to reevaluate and talk to a doctor or supplement-savvy healthcare practitioner.

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