Dietary Supplements
(also called nutritional or herbal supplements)

What are they?
A dietary supplement is something that adds to your daily meal plan. There are many kinds of supplements – vitamins, minerals, herbs, botanicals, amino acids and enzymes. You can buy them over-the-counter in grocery stores, pharmacies or health food stores.

Supplements come in forms such as tablets, capsules, softgels, liquids or powders. Some can be taken alone. Others are added to certain soft drinks or blended in food products.

Do you need them?
Talk with your health care provider if you are thinking about taking a dietary supplement. Here are some points you’ll want to talk about:

• Why do you want to take a supplement? Is it to improve your health? Or do you have a goal in mind, such as to take this supplement in place of a prescription medicine?

• What medicines and supplements do you take now? Some supplements do not work well with each other or with certain medicines.

• Are you having surgery? Some supplements can increase the risk of bleeding or affect how medicines will work during and after surgery.

• Do you have a chronic (long-term) health problem? Some supplements may not be safe for you to use.

• Are you pregnant or nursing? Are you thinking about giving your child a supplement? Many products have not been tested for safe use with children and infants. Supplements taken by a pregnant woman can affect an unborn child.

Before you take a supplement, what should you know about it?

• What is it made of? Is everything in this product safe to take? Are there studies that show this?

• Will this supplement work for the reason I want to take it?

• Is it a high quality product? A good sign to look for is “USP” on the label. The USP (United States Pharmacopeia) sets the safe standard and tests for quality of supplements.

• Was it made according to the Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)? Does it break down and work in the body within a certain amount of time (listed on the label)? Is there anything in it that could be harmful? Check the product label for a seal from the GMP.

• Does the maker give their name, address, lot number and expiration date on the bottle? This is a sign of higher quality.

• “Natural” is listed on many labels. Natural does not always mean the product is safe or works well. There may be side effects and other facts you should know before taking it.

Please keep in mind . . .
Right now the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) looks at dietary supplements as food products. Their rules for these products are less strict than for prescription drugs. The makers do not have to prove that their supplements are safe or work well.

Buyer beware!
How to get science-based facts about safe products:

Food and Drug Administration Center for Food Safety and applied Nutrition
cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/supplmnt.html
- The FDA does not have the same control over dietary supplements as it has over other foods and drugs. Supplements do not have to be sent to the FDA before they are put on the market.
- The FDA takes action with the maker of a supplement only if it is found to be unsafe after it has been put on the market.

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
nccam.nih.gov
- NCCAM is a free resource that offers science-based facts you can trust.
- Call toll free 888-644-6226, TTY (for hearing-impaired callers) 866-464-3615
- Email: info@nccam.nih.gov
- Address: NCCAM Clearinghouse, P.O. Box 7923, Gaithersburg, MD 20898-7923.

Consumer Lab
consumerlab.com
- Provides testing to find the best quality health and nutrition products.
- Offers a free e-newsletter or, for a small fee, you can become a member and receive more in-depth information.

Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database
naturaldatabase.com
- Provides information on natural medicines based on clinical research.

United States Pharmacopeia
usp.org
- United States Pharmacopeia is a non-profit agency that sets safe standards and tests for purity, potency (strength) and quality in dietary supplements.
- The website offers a complete list of companies taking part in the USP testing process.

Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) Institute
gmp1st.com
- The Good Manufacturing Practice guidelines were put into effect by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, under the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act for food.
- The GMP rules require that those who make, process and package food take steps to ensure that their products are safe, pure and work well. This helps cut down on errors and helps to protect those who are buying the products.

MedlinePlus
nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html
- MedlinePlus is a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health.
- Information about herbs and supplements within MedlinePlus is from Natural Standard, a trusted information source: naturalstandard.com.
Natural Standard exists to help patients and health care workers make informed and safe decisions about these products.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.