

# Supplements: Friend or Foe?

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## Introduction

In order to build stronger, leaner bodies, our bodies must be challenged. Without adequate stimulus we will not change. Our bodies change because they **have to**, to meet the challenges we set for them. The human body is an amazing, adaptive, and resilient machine that will rise to any challenge given enough time and adequate resources. However, although it may seem like it at times, the body is not magic. Our body cannot rise to the challenges we put it through

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without the resources needed. You cannot build a house without any materials, irrespective of your level of motivation to do so. For our bodies to continue rising to and overcoming the challenges we set for them, we require resources. These include proper hydration, good sleep hygiene, mobilization, stress management, nutrition, and more. This article will focus mainly on nutrition.

## What Is Nutrition?

Nutrition is a collection of everything we ingest., from water to food to supplements. When someone eats a well balanced diet (one consisting of what is needed for that particular person) we say that they have good nutrition. Conversely when someone eats a diet that does not give their body enough of what they need (or too much) we say that they have poor nutrition. By this token, the same diet may be considered good nutrition for one person and bad for another. A strength athlete who has rigorous training daily will need additional carbs in order for his body to continue to perform at the desired level, however, someone with a more sedentary lifestyle who works out casually a few times a week requires a much lower carbohydrate intake. In our search for our own personal good nutrition, sometimes we turn to supplements. Working out and supplementing have become so intertwined as to be all but inseparable in today's fitness industry, however, the question remains: do we **need** supplements?

Do we **need** protein shakes or mass gainers to build muscle?

Do we **need** thermogenics to lose weight?

Do we **need** supplemental vitamins to maintain general health?

Do we **need** pre workout or creatine or both to have an effective workout?

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To answer these questions, we need to ask ourselves if we can do any of the above without supplements, to which the answer is: yes. We don't **need** any supplements to achieve our desired fitness goals. That being said some may help us achieve our goals faster and easier, while others may actually be detrimental to our health.

## My Experience With Supplements

The first time I ever went to purchase supplements, I entered the \*insert generic supplement store name\* and was immediately wide-eyed with all the options available, all the various claims, and was immediately sold protein powder, multivitamins, creatine, pre workout, testosterone boosting tribulus pills, and a dream. A dream that all I need to do is follow the instructions on the labels, push myself in my workouts, and my results would follow. It was not until years later that I realized the true value of a balanced diet. I had been stuck at about relatively lean 180lbs, and unable to break through that weight, or increase my bench press to the famed 225lb mini hall of fame. I struggled to eat small meals, usually home cooked but in small portions, never getting enough protein, and avoiding fats wherever possible. I reassured myself that I was healthy - supplementing everything I could while eating like a bird and getting poor sleep. This went on until a combination of frustration with never meeting my fitness goals, asking questions, conducting my own research, Michael Pollan's *"In defense of food"* (an excellent read by the way) and Rich Piana's videos where he yells at a skeleton: "If you wanna grow you gotta eat Goddammit!", turned my eating philosophy on its head. From that point on I stopped taking supplements, no more pre-workout meant I had to develop the motivation to workout all on my own, no protein shakes meant i had to eat more chicken breast, no mass gainer meant my portions had to increase. It was only once I had left all the supplements behind and adhered to a well balanced diet that I had finally developed my own

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“good nutrition”. Benching 225 became a distant accolade and I quickly surpassed lifting weights I had only dreamt of in the past. And better still I *felt good*. I didn't feel like I was running on fumes, or I wouldn't be able to function without my morning caffeine fix. This is not to say that coffee is bad, but I've always believed that we should do things because we choose to not because we have to. Eventually I reintroduced supplements into my life but this time I saw them for what they are: Supplements, as in *supplemental* to a balanced diet, not replacements.

To reiterate: Are supplements bad? By and large, no. Can they be misused? Yes.

I hope I haven't vilified supplements with this article, as that was not my intention.

Supplements definitely have their place. They are more of a matter of convenience and can certainly help achieve goals, I'm merely supporting the argument that they are not necessary (with the exception of course of supplements that help manage nutritional deficiencies etc).

And that supplements are not a replacement for a healthy diet.

The greek physician Hippocrates once said “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.” This has always resonated with me, reminding me to always start with step 1: maintain a healthy balanced diet, before moving on to other ways to be healthy.

**I recommend that you:**

- **Eat real food & Sleep well**
- **Eat a balanced diet (proteins, fats, carbs, micronutrients)**
- **Eat the quantity that brings you closer to your personal ideal body**

**(be realistic about what your ideal body is, and fully aware of your holistic health).**

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- **Avoid being drawn in by big unsubstantiated claims. (If it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true)**

Once you have all that in check, and you feel that your workouts are still too strenuous to continue without supplements, then there may be a place for supplements in your life. The supplements I recommend that have the biggest scientific backing are creatine, protein powder (tons of options here but generally whey iso is the most bio-available and contains a wide range of amino acids), and multivitamins (again not all are created equal). Whatever your choice may be, adopting a critical view of what you are putting your body is always a positive step in the right direction.

**Stay strong.**

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