Dr. Kligler said that vitamins and nutritional supplements cannot replace a healthy balanced diet but can be useful for people who are ill or have difficulty in eating such a diet.

The facts about nutritional supplements and health were outlined in the latest edition of WCMC-Q’s Ask the Expert series.

The interactive public talks are part of the College’s Sahtak Awalan – Your Health First campaign and aim to help the public understand health matters and encourage them to make positive changes to their lives. At the latest talk, held at the Diplomatic Club, Dr. Benjamin Kligler, vice chair and research director in the Department of Integrative Medicine at the Continuum Center for Health and Healing, New York, spoke about the benefits and risks of taking vitamin and mineral supplements alongside a normal diet.

Firstly, Dr. Kligler said that supplements should never be used as alternatives to a balanced diet.

He said: “Eating a varied and healthy diet is the most important part of proper nutrition. Taking vitamins and nutritional supplements can be helpful but cannot take the place of a healthy diet which focuses on whole rather than highly processed foods and includes 5-10 servings of fruits and vegetables every day.”

However, for those who have difficulty in eating a balanced diet, are pregnant, or have chronic illnesses, nutritional supplements can be a convenient and important way of maintaining your health. For most people, multivitamins are perhaps the most common nutritional supplement, but Dr. Kligler said it was important to ensure the brand used also contains essential minerals like selenium and magnesium.

In addition, he said that certain brands of multivitamins are not easily broken down by the body, hence not all of the supplement is absorbed. However, there is a way of testing how easily the body will break down a multivitamin.

- Place approximately one cup of white vinegar in a small bowl and warm it to 98 degrees or so by placing it inside a larger bowl of water that you "top up" several times with warm water from the tap. (The goal is to keep the vinegar reasonably close to 98 degrees for half an hour.)
- Drop your multi-vitamin (or other pill) into the vinegar, and jostle it about every five minutes or so by gently shaking or swirling the cup. While you can also stir the mix with a wooden stick or toothpick, be careful not to touch the tablet itself.
• The tablet should dissolve within 30 minutes. If it doesn't dissolve within a full hour it is unlikely to be completely digested and absorbed in the body.

Dr. Kligler also spoke about calcium supplements, fish oil and probiotics among other supplements. The latter is particularly useful for treating diarrhea and other gastrointestinal illnesses. But as with anything concerned with your health, it is always advisable to consult your doctor first before taking nutritional supplements, particularly if you have an underlying medical condition.

In reiterating the value of balanced nutrition and appropriate use of supplements when indicated, Dr. Ravinder Mamtani, associate dean of global and public health at WCMC-Q, said: “It is important for everyone to know and understand the benefits, risks and limitations associated with use of nutritional supplements.”

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