

Facts about Vitamin B₁₂

Provided by your Neighborly Care Network Dietitian

Why do we need vitamin B₁₂?

Vitamin B₁₂ works with the B vitamin folate to make DNA, our body's genetic material. B₁₂ is needed to protect nerve cells from damage. It also helps keep blood levels of the amino acid homocysteine low. This may help to decrease heart disease risk in some people.

Everyone needs vitamin B₁₂. Older adults and strict vegetarians (vegans) need to be sure to get enough B₁₂ by using fortified foods or supplements.

What happens if we don't get enough vitamin B₁₂?

Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency causes anemia. This affects blood and nerves. With anemia, the body can't make normal red blood cells to carry oxygen in the blood. Lack of oxygen makes people weak and tired. Nerve damage can lead to paralysis and death.

How much vitamin B₁₂ do we need?

People over 70 years of age need 399 micrograms (ug)/day.

How can we get enough vitamin B₁₂?

Vitamin B₁₂ is found naturally only in foods of animal origin like meats, fish, poultry, eggs, and dairy foods. Older persons often cannot absorb vitamin B₁₂ from these foods. Fortified breads and cereals contain vitamin B₁₂ in a form that is easily absorbed. You can check the ingredient list on food labels to see if vitamin B₁₂ has been added.

How should foods be prepared to retain vitamin B₁₂?

Vitamin B₁₂ is not easily destroyed by cooking. This is good to know since the main food sources of vitamin B₁₂, including meat, fish, and poultry, need to be well cooked. Other sources, like fortified cereals, may not need cooking.

What about supplements?

If you don't get enough vitamin B₁₂ from foods, you can take a multivitamin supplement. Strict vegetarians who do not eat fortified cereals or fortified soy foods need to take vitamin B₁₂ in a supplement. Also, older adults often do not absorb vitamin B₁₂ very well. If they don't get adequate B₁₂ from fortified foods, they need a supplement as well.

Reliable nutrition information may be found on the Internet at the following sites:

<http://fyas.ifas.ufl.edu>

<http://ods.od.nih.gov>

<http://www.nutrition.gov>