

# Facts about Vitamin A<sup>1</sup>

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## Why do we need vitamin A?



Vitamin A is a fat-soluble vitamin that is essential to our health. It helps us see normally in the dark. Vitamin A also promotes normal growth and health of body cells, and keeps skin healthy.

There are animal sources (retinol) and vegetable sources (carotenoids) of vitamin A in foods. Only a few of the carotenoids in foods are converted to vitamin A in the body. Beta-carotene is the most familiar carotenoid.

Beta-carotene, and several other carotenoids, act as antioxidants. Antioxidants help slow down or prevent cell damage. By protecting cells from damage, antioxidants may reduce risk for certain cancers and heart disease.

## What happens if we don't get enough vitamin A?

Inadequate intake of vitamin A can cause night blindness, dry scaly skin, increased risk for infections, and poor growth.



## How much vitamin A do we need?

Recommended intakes for vitamin A are given as “Retinol Activity Equivalents.”

This helps to account for the differences between carotenoids and retinol. It takes about 12 units of beta-carotene or 24 units of other carotenoids to make 1 unit of retinol in the body.

The following table lists recommended daily intakes of vitamin A:

| Life Stage  | Vitamin A (µg/day as RAE) |
|---|---------------------------|
| Men, ages 19+   | 900                       |
| Women, ages 19+                                       | 700                       |
| Pregnancy   | 770                       |
| Breastfeeding   | 1300                      |
| µg = micrograms<br>RAE = Retinol Activity Equivalents |                           |

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## How can we get enough vitamin A?

We get vitamin A by eating a variety of fruits and vegetables that contain carotenoids, and from dairy products fortified with vitamin A. Vitamin A also is found in liver and egg yolks.



Here are some foods and the amount of vitamin A they contain:

| Food  | Vitamin A (RAE*) |
|---|------------------|
| Sweet potato, cooked, 1 medium                | 1240             |
| Carrot, raw, 1 medium                         | 1010             |
| Pumpkin, cooked, ½ cup                        | 660              |
| Cantaloupe, cubed, 1 cup                      | 260              |
| Apricots, 3 medium                            | 140              |
| Egg yolk, cooked, 1 large                     | 100              |
| Cheese, cheddar, 1 oz                         | 90               |
| Milk, 1 cup                                   | 80               |
| Broccoli, pieces, 1 cup                       | 70               |
| * Retinol Activity Equivalents<br>oz = ounces |                  |

## What about supplements?



We don't need supplements since vitamin A is so widely available in foods and easily stored in the body. Pregnant women especially should avoid taking retinol supplements. High doses during pregnancy can cause birth defects. Look for beta-carotene as the vitamin A source in prenatal supplements.

## How much is too much?

Taking large doses of retinol can cause severe health problems. These include vomiting, bone and joint pain, dry scaly skin, and liver damage. Vitamin A toxicity can kill you! **Keep your total vitamin A intake less than 3,000 µg per day from retinol.**

## Where can I get more information?

The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your county Extension office may have more written information and nutrition classes for you to attend. Also, a registered dietitian (RD) can provide reliable information to you.

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

- <http://fycs.ifas.ufl.edu>
- <http://www.eatright.org>
- <http://www.nutrition.gov>

