Ask Dr. Weil: Organic Nuts; Freezing in Plastic; TUMS; & More

Is it important to eat organic nuts and nut butters versus non-organic?

Tree nuts such as almonds, walnuts, and cashews concern me less, since their shells protect against pesticide residues. But I'm wary of peanuts, which are legumes that grow underground and are more likely to be contaminated. Storing peanuts makes them susceptible to attack by a mold that produces a potent carcinogen, called aflatoxin. Organic peanuts are probably no safer in this respect.

Organic nut butters tend to be healthier than conventional varieties because they're primarily ground-up nuts with minimal salt and no hydrogenated vegetable oils or added sweeteners. But oils in organic nut butters separate while on the shelf and need a good stir before spreading.

Is taking too much supplemental vitamin D dangerous?

It's highly unlikely. Most experts estimate an adult would have to take a massive dose—roughly 40,000 to 50,000 IU a day (or 100 to 125 of the 400 IU capsules)—for several months to achieve toxicity. In theory, you can overload on the vitamin by getting too much sun (which causes your body to produce vitamin D) combined with taking a high prescription or supplemental dose (such as large amounts of cod-liver oil). Megadoses can raise blood levels of calcium and possibly lead to confusion and heart-rhythm disturbances. Other symptoms of vitamin D toxicity include nausea, weakness, and weight loss. Again, this is extremely rare. The tolerable upper intake level set by the Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine in 1997 is 2,000 IU a day of vitamin D for adults, an amount now considered very conservative among scientists. Indeed, some researchers recommend this amount to reduce the risk of breast and colorectal cancers.

I wouldn't worry about vitamin D toxicity; the bigger concern is getting too little of this essential nutrient from diet, supplements, or sun exposure. I advise taking at least 1,000 IU a day of vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol).

I received an email that said freezing water in plastic releases harmful chemicals. Is this true?

Emails containing warnings to avoid freezing water in plastic bottles in order to reduce exposure to carcinogens are false, and one that keeps popping up is erroneously attributed to Johns Hopkins University. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that *freezing* food or beverages in plastic is harmful, but many kitchen plastics could potentially leach chemicals, especially when they are exposed to heat or used to store fatty foods like cheese and meat. Based on animal studies, scientists fear that even low levels of some chemicals, such as bisphenol A (BPA) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC), might reduce immunity and affect memory in adults, and cause cancer and irreversible organ damage in fetuses and children. For these reasons, I avoid using plastic containers and use only ceramic, glass, or metal varieties for storage.

If you like the convenience of plastic, I suggest avoiding PVC (labeled #3), found in some cooking-oil bottles and plastic wrap, and BPA (often classified as #7), found in many polycarbonate plastics such as baby bottles, beverage containers, and those marked as microwaveable. However, it's probably fine to freeze fat-free and cold foods in bags and containers made of polyethylene (labeled #1, #2, or #4) and polypropylene (labeled #5). These products have not been shown to cause harm. If a container isn't numbered, you'd have to contact the manufacturer for more information on its materials.

Are TUMS a good calcium source?

I consider the over-the-counter antacid a perfectly good source of calcium carbonate, and many find it to be a pleasant-tasting and inexpensive way to get the mineral. Each tablet contains 200 to 400 mg of elemental calcium. (Some forms of Rolaids also provide calcium carbonate.) While calcium carbonate is a good supplement choice for those on a limited budget (take it with meals), it may not be as well absorbed as calcium citrate, the form I recommend especially for older people. Calcium citrate is typically more expensive and the pills are larger, but it's still my top choice for seniors, who typically have less stomach acid. A sufficient amount of acid in the stomach is needed to absorb calcium carbonate, the type found in TUMS. I advise women to get no more than 700 mg daily of supplemental calcium and 1,000 to 1,200 mg from food and supplements combined; men should aim for a total of 500 to 600 mg from all sources, primarily food.

A recent study suggested that taking selenium raises the risk of diabetes. What are your thoughts?

There's no reason to be too concerned. The study, which was published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (August 21, 2007), involved people with a history of nonmelanoma skin cancer. Among participants with higher blood levels of selenium at the trial's start, people who took 200 mcg of the mineral daily were more likely to develop type 2 diabetes over a seven-year period than those taking a placebo.

However, it's unclear if these preliminary findings apply to individuals who haven't had skin cancer, and the study didn't consider other diabetes risk factors such as a sedentary lifestyle and family history. What's more, other research suggests selenium supplementation may help prevent vascular complications in people with diabetes.

Until there's better evidence, I continue to recommend that everyone take 200 mcg of selenium daily for its antioxidant effects. But don't take more: Too much can have unhealthy effects on hair and nails. Choose organic yeast-bound forms of the mineral, which are better absorbed.

Please send your health questions to Ask Dr. Weil, Self Healing, 42 Pleasant St., Watertown MA 02472.

fast fact ▸ Smokers over the age of 55 were 50 percent more likely to develop dementia than similar nonsmokers in a recent study.