

Vitamin, Mineral, and Herbal Supplements

A healthy dog needs his vitamins to stay in his best shape.

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If you pop a multivitamin every morning, should you be tossing your dog a canine supplement as well? Vitamins and minerals are essential components of a dog's diet. They govern many processes in the body, including regulation of heartbeat, ability of the circulatory system to deliver nutrients to the body, and neural activity. High-quality dog foods are specifically formulated to deliver all the nutrients dogs need to stay healthy. Why then do manufacturers produce so many different dog dietary supplements of vitamins, minerals, herbs, and other substances?

Some dogs have special needs such as a weakened immune system that make supplementation a smart choice. Many people claim that supplements have helped their dogs overcome chronic diseases or have alleviated their symptoms. Some dog owners may choose to use supplementation as a preventive measure against future health problems. But some vets advise against supplementation because dog foods are nutritionally complete and certain vitamins, minerals, and herbs given in large doses may be harmful to some dogs. Other vets worry that processed commercial dog food has lost much of the nutrition present in the original ingredients and that supplementation is an important safeguard against deficiencies, some of which may be too minor to detect but which could eventually lead to chronic health problems. Supplementation, these vets argue, is a safety net and will not hurt dogs as long as their owners administer supplements according to package directions.

Supplement manufacturers and many holistic veterinarians argue that supplements aren't effective unless given in doses more exacting than those in dog foods; it can be difficult to determine how much of a supplement a dog actually receives from a bowl of kibble. In supplement form, vitamins, minerals, herbs, and other substances can be administered in the exact dosages appropriate for different ages, weights, and breeds of dogs.

According to regulatory agencies like the FDA, dog supplements fall into a gray area between food and medicine, and many of the ingredients in these supplements are unregulated. Proceed with caution and give them to your dog only under the guidance of a veterinarian who is knowledgeable on the subject. Even if herbs are legal and saleable, they aren't always safe for every dog in every situation.

Supplements that contain the same vitamins and minerals found in food may seem safe, but this isn't always so, either. For instance, dogs store fat-soluble vitamins like vitamin D in their bodies. If they ingest too much of it, the vitamin can accumulate to the point of becoming toxic. Supplements of water-soluble vitamins like C and E probably are less likely to cause a toxic reaction in dogs because they are typically eliminated from the body daily, but any vitamin or mineral taken in megadoses could be potentially dangerous.