Supplements and When to Use Them

Mid meals and supplement drinks are very important when trying to increase energy intake. There are many supplements available commercially to meet individual needs. While the range and types of oral supplements available continue to increase, choosing the right supplement becomes increasingly complex.

There is a wide variety of commercial nutrition supplements on the market today. These supplements are foods that can be used to increase the intake of protein and energy in the diet, as well as providing additional vitamins and minerals. They are of particular benefit when a person is losing weight or becoming malnourished despite attempts to increase protein and energy intake through food and drink alone.

Supplements are widely used to either “top up” the needs of residents who are at nutritional risk or to totally meet the nutritional needs of a resident. Where possible, taking feeding supplements orally is always preferred. This is partly because there is a lower risk of infection, but also because residents usually prefer this method.

Commercially available powder or liquid supplements are useful as a “back-up” system for clients who are not meeting their nutritional needs. Many of these supplements can be used as ingredients in already existing dishes to produce a very high energy and highly nutritious product.

Supplements are available in a variety of energy concentrations, in liquid, powder or pudding/jelly form and in milky, fruity, neutral and savoury flavours. Specialised supplements and modules are available for use in particular disease states or for special purposes. Commercially available supplements are usually lactose and gluten free and generally have a low GI. Some supplements include fibre while others do not. Most commercial nutritional supplements are nutritionally complete but some are not.

Nutritionally complete supplements contain the three macronutrients (protein, fat and carbohydrate) in the same proportions that nutritionists recommend for healthy eating. They also contain all the micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) that have been identified as being essential for life. These supplements are designed so that the resident could live on them alone if needed. They are important when making up the majority of a resident’s energy and nutrient needs for the day. Nutritionally complete supplements can often (but not always) also be used for tube or enteral feeding.

Incomplete formulas do not contain all of the essential macro and micronutrients in correct proportion. They can still be very useful for increasing energy, protein and nutrient intake. When a resident is not relying totally on the supplement and is still consuming a reasonable oral intake of other foods, these supplements will still be very effective in helping the resident to gain weight and improve nutritional status in a relatively well-balanced manner.