

Did You Know?



Do you know what's in the foods you eat? ARS scientists do; in fact, ARS scientists continually develop and validate analytical methods to find out what's in the foods, beverages, and dietary supplements you consume.

Let's take vitamin D as an example. Vitamin D helps the body use calcium and phosphorus to build and maintain strong

bones and teeth. As many of you know, it can be formed in human skin by sunlight. But when sun exposure is limited, dietary sources for vitamin D are needed.

Researchers at ARS's Food Composition and Methods Development Laboratory in Beltsville, MD—part of the Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center (BHNRC)—pioneered new, highly precise methods for analyzing vitamin D in foods and dietary supplements. Another BHNRC unit, the ARS Nutrient Data Laboratory, headed up vitamin D food analysis studies of various products that resulted in the addition of vitamin D values for 3,000 foods in the lab's nutrient database, the [USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference](#), which covers 150 nutrients in about 8,500 foods.

As part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES)—the only nationally representative study on this topic—researchers at the ARS Food Surveys Research Group, part of BHNRC, interview thousands of people annually about what they eat. They then translate all the "foods eaten" into "nutrients consumed." For example, although our food supply is abundant, ARS's "What We Eat in America" survey has shown that about half of the people in the United States are not getting ideal levels of magnesium; about 40 percent are not getting enough vitamin A; and one-third are not getting enough vitamin C from the foods and beverages consumed.

That's just a snapshot of what ARS scientists are doing to find out if U.S. consumers are getting adequate vitamins and minerals from their daily diets. And now you, too, can do your own research to discover nutrient intake of the foods you eat. Simply visit the [ARS Food Survey Research Group's Web site](#) to find the user-friendly search tool called "[What's In The Foods You Eat.](#)" The tool lists 65 different nutrients in familiar portion sizes for around 8,000 food items. The tool is useful even if you just want to check the number of calories.

So the next time you want to look up the calories or nutrient content of what you're eating, you can thank your ARS colleagues for providing easy-to-use and accurate tools to do just that.

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