

Health

Are Prenatal Vitamins the Secret to Better Hair and Skin—Even If You're Not Pregnant?

Kathleen Mulpeter – February 1, 2018

Some women claim that taking prenatal vitamins when they're not pregnant improves hair growth and gives them shinier, healthier strands. But is it safe to take these nutrient-packed pills when you're not expecting? We asked experts to weigh in.

It's no secret that prenatal vitamins are packed with a slew of essential nutrients like folic acid, iron, calcium, vitamin D, and others that help support baby's development and protect against or birth defects of the brain, spine, or spinal cord, called neural tube defects. But could they also deliver an admittedly less important but still appealing perk for *non*-pregnant women—longer, faster-growing hair and smoother skin?

Recently, it seems like everyone I talk to is taking prenatal vitamins for the beauty benefits. The trend appears to have gotten Hollywood's stamp of approval, too. A quick Google search confirms that LeAnn Rimes, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Mindy Kaling all swear by prenats for red carpet-ready strands. "[Prenatal vitamins] will not only scare your boyfriend, [they] will make your hair grow faster, thicker, and keep your skin glow-y and smooth," Kaling said a few years ago.

So should us non-pregnant folks be stocking up on prenatal vitamins at the pharmacy? After all, many reproductive-age women take prenats when trying to conceive but before they're actually pregnant. Doctors often recommend this, in fact, since neural tubes develop in the very earliest stages of pregnancy. But are there any

long-term side effects to consider, or reasons you might want to stick to a regular multivitamin instead?

We polled dermatologists, nutritionists, and a GI doc to find out what they think. **Ava Shamban**, MD, a Beverly Hills dermatologist and founder of SKINxFIVE, tells us that it's probably OK for a non-pregnant woman to take prenats, even though the vitamins contain more than the average non-pregnant woman might need. "They are calculated for the needs of a pregnant woman, not an elephant," she says. Some people might notice a difference in their skin and hair after using them, she adds.

But other experts we spoke to warned against taking these pills when you're not trying to conceive.

"For the first few months after having a baby—when you may not have time to eat a balanced diet and feel exhausted—taking prenatal vitamins is fine," says *Health's* contributing medical editor Roshini Rajapaksa, MD, an assistant professor of medicine at the NYU School of Medicine. "But long term, they have higher than necessary amounts of certain vitamins and minerals that can cause [negative] side effects."

Two in particular to be aware of are iron and folic acid, Dr. Rajapaksa says. Some women can benefit from an iron supplement, such as young women with especially heavy periods and, of course, moms-to-be (the nutrient aids baby's brain development and helps prevent iron deficiency anemia in pregnancy). But too much of this mineral can be a bad thing.

"Taking more iron than you need all the time can lead to constipation, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or worse," says Cynthia Sass, RD, MPH, *Health's* contributing nutrition editor.

Folic acid, too, can be dangerous in large amounts, and is "one of the most significant differences you'll find in comparing a prenatal and regular multivitamin," says Stephanie Middleberg, RD, a nutritionist based in New York City. This B vitamin is important during pregnancy because it helps prevent neural tube defects and pre-term birth. While you don't have to worry about overdoing it on folate—the natural form of folic acid found in foods like fruits, veggies, and nuts—through diet, consuming too much in supplement form might mask a vitamin B12 deficiency or even up your risk of colorectal cancer, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Wendy Bazilian, DrPH, RD, a San Diego-based nutritionist and author of *Eat Clean, Stay Lean* (\$22; amazon.com) tells us she does recommend prenats to her female athlete clients since athletes tend to have a greater risk of low iron levels, as well as to women who think they might get pregnant soon. But she points out that other than folic acid, iron, and the essential fatty acid DHA, the vitamins and minerals in most prenats are pretty standard. For that reason, "prenats may not give an additional 'boost' above a regular quality multivitamin," she notes.

If you're after longer hair, Debra Jaliman, MD, a dermatologist based in New York City, recommends a daily biotin supplement for non-pregnant women instead. She suggests one that contains 2.5 milligrams (2,500 micrograms) of the B vitamin, such as Nature Made High Potency Biotin Softgels (\$14; amazon.com). Another option is collagen peptides, which Middleberg says she often recommends for healthier skin, hair, and nails. Our pick: Vital Proteins Collagen Peptides (\$15; amazon.com), which you can easily mix into smoothies or juice.

<http://www.health.com/beauty/prenatal-vitamins-better-skin-hair>