

What Is a Medical Food, and Why Do I Need It?



What is a medical food?

A medical food is used under the direct supervision of a physician or other licensed healthcare practitioner and is intended for the specific dietary management of a disease or condition that has distinctive nutritional requirements.



Who can benefit from a medical food?

Certain medical conditions may have distinct nutritional requirements, and diet alone just won't cut it. Medical foods may be helpful for the nutritional management of certain chronic health conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease. A medical food may be recommended to support those who have trouble digesting and absorbing food and certain nutrients and cannot nutritionally manage their condition through diet modification alone.



How is a medical food different from a dietary supplement?

It can be challenging to obtain all of the necessary nutrients required for health on a regular basis from food alone. Dietary supplements help meet the nutritional needs of healthy people by providing one or more dietary ingredients such as vitamins and minerals, herbs, botanicals, amino acids, or enzymes. On the other hand, medical foods help manage the distinctive nutritional requirements of people with specific medical conditions by providing unique combinations of nutritional ingredients.



My medical food is a powder. Is it the same as a protein shake?

No. Protein shakes are a way to supplement or increase your dietary protein intake. Unlike medical foods, they are not formulated to support the dietary management of a specific disease state. However, you can use your medical food to make a "shake" or smoothie by blending with fruit, liquid, greens, etc.



Why is supervision of a healthcare provider recommended when consuming a medical food?

Medical foods need to be administered in a very specific way depending on the underlying condition. Patients who use medical foods have health conditions that require medical management and guidance from a healthcare provider who can administer and adjust the medical food recommendations as needed.



What are the ingredients in a medical food?

The ingredients within a medical food, which will vary depending on the underlying condition it is designed to manage, must be accepted by the FDA as generally recognized as safe (GRAS). Medical foods need to be tested for contaminants to ensure purity. Ideally, medical foods offer well-researched formulas with demonstrated tolerability and positive clinical outcomes.



Is there any reason I should NOT take a medical food?

Only take a medical food when recommended by your healthcare practitioner. It is essential, however, to discuss concerns and changes with your healthcare provider, including your list of medications and supplements, to ensure the correct approach is applied and adjustments made when needed.

