The Dirt on Supplements

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An intriguing gardening article recently suggested that the supposedly "unhealthy" soil many of us have around our houses may just be an urban myth. In fact, amending the soil to "improve" it may damage root systems and leave lawns inches below the grade of existing surfaces. What, you may ask, does this discussion about dirt have to do with supplements?

Naturopathic medicine often uses the metaphor of "soil" to talk about the conditions in our bodies that contribute to our health. Healthy "soil" is the result of appropriate diet, movement, sleep, intimacy, and a range of other healthy activities and behaviors. Many of our patients, however, have this feeling that somehow their "soil" is unhealthy and needs to be amended by either having intensive detoxification experiences or by taking large numbers of supplements. I have had patients come to me with literally a shopping bag filled with supplements. When I ask them why they are taking this or that, they often say that they read something in a magazine, heard something on TV, or bought a supplement on the advice of a friend or family member.

Compared to eating food, taking a supplement is a less natural act. They do not grow on trees or sprout out of the ground. Rather, even the most organic and minimally processed supplement still requires manufacturing. It is certainly true that, compared to centuries ago, we are now living in very different reality that may require the use of certain supplements. For example, I would put a quality multivitamin in this category, despite the objections of some of the more conservative elements of conventional medicine. But handfuls of supplement are rarely needed.

However, depending on where you work, your exposure to toxic substances could be intensified, contributing significantly to your health issues.
Occupational allergies are becoming an extremely common concern, with cases increasing in numbers and severity in recent years. There have been countless articles written on both “Sick Building Syndrome” and “Occupational Asthma.” Under these two modern diagnoses, people have complained of a variety of symptoms including watery eyes, runny nose, headaches, dizziness, nausea and tightening sensation in the chest. The curious thing about most of these symptoms is that they have a distinct pattern of getting worse while in the work environment and significantly better over vacations or weekends.

If you work in an enclosed office space, you might feel falsely safe and protected from environmental allergens at work. But modern office buildings are not only being built with toxic chemicals but, in order to conserve energy, they are also built with poor ventilation, leaving allergens and irritants trapped inside.

Common sources, such as malfunctioning, inappropriate, or inefficient use of heating devices, can produce irritating pollutants such as carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide at harmful levels. Formaldehyde exposure is widespread and found in resins in finishes, plywood, paneling, fiberboard and particleboard, and in some backings and adhesives for carpets.

Biological air pollutants like dander, molds, and dust mites are carried by animals and people into and throughout buildings. Scents and hairsprays, construction products such as finishes, heavy duty cleaners, paints, thinners, dry cleaning fluids, some copiers and printers, some glues and adhesives, markers, and photo solutions are among some of the common office products that emit harmful volatile organic compounds (VOC). New installations, carpet, wall coverings, paint or construction can all heighten problems with VOCs.

If that isn’t enough to worry about, almost everyone has heard of the dangers of toxic mold thriving in cool, damp, dark places behind walls and under carpeting.

Some occupations that are even higher risk for exposure include industrial workers handling paints, chemicals, solvents, and plastics; beauticians who work daily with hair dyes, perms, and nail polish/removers; people who are in the farming industry dealing with fertilizers and pesticides; photocopier technicians and dry cleaning merchants working with machines emitting potentially harmful gases.

If you feel that your workplace is making you sick, there are things you can do, short of quitting your job.
Make sure you are protecting your immune system by choosing healthy, organic foods in your diet for adequate nutrients and fiber, drink plenty of filtered water, exercise regularly, choose non-toxic products for your home . . .

Reducing exposure is important but it is also important to remember that having an allergic response to something often has less to do with the trigger and more to do with our body’s inability to respond to it appropriately. Make sure you are protecting your immune system by choosing healthy, organic foods in your diet for adequate nutrients and fiber, drink plenty of
filtered water, exercise regularly, choose non-toxic products for your home and consider partnering with a qualified healthcare practitioner to partake in a comprehensive body detoxification.

In your workplace, consider talking with both your supervisor and your OSHA or union representative regarding the air exchange system in your building. Interior landscaping can help absorb some of the off-gassing from VOC and formaldehyde. Buying plants like a Dwarf date palm, Bamboo palm or Janet Craig is an inexpensive, efficient method of cleansing the air. Keep your work area free of clutter, dust regularly and use a HEPA-type table top air purifier.

Even though we cannot completely escape the toxins that surround us, we can make a difference for us as individuals and, little by little, the environment as a whole!