

Value of Vitamins Disputed Yet Again: So Why Bother?

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The language used in an editorial in the august pages of Annals of Internal Medicine was unequivocal:

“We believe that the case is closed – supplementing the diet of well-nourished adults with (most) mineral or vitamin supplements has no clear benefit and might even be harmful. These vitamins should not be used for chronic disease prevention. Enough is enough.”



The shot across the bow, from mid-December, was only the latest attack on the vitamins-and-supplements industry, which accounts for about \$30 billion a year in sales in the United States. About half of that is from multivitamins – those pills contain a wide variety of nutrients and minerals necessary to maintain bodily health.

No one argues that, for some, deficiencies of certain vitamins and minerals – such as E, D and zinc – are a real concern. What is a subject of heated debate, even after the Annals issue of Dec. 17, is whether otherwise healthy people should even bother with them.

“Do you know anyone who has scurvy, or rickets?” asks Dr. David B. Agus, director of the Center for Applied Molecular Medicine at USC's Keck School of Medicine.

Agus, an oncologist, published the best-selling book “The End of Illness” (2012), in which he suggests common-sense steps to prevent disease, such as: Eat, sleep and

exercise at the same time each day; drink red wine with dinner; don't sit around so much.

He also points to research undermining the case for multivitamins and other supplements: A 2010 federal government study said they didn't prevent cancer or heart disease except in developing countries, where there's often a dearth of nutritious food and available health care. In poorer nations, scurvy (which brings lethargy and open sores and which is caused by a lack of vitamin C) and rickets (which softens bones and is caused by a lack of vitamin D and possibly calcium) are real problems, but not in wealthier countries.

“As soon as there's data showing a benefit, I'll change my tune. But for a normal individual, there is no benefit,” said Agus, whose new book is called “A Short Guide to a Long Life.”

That December Annals issue contained three separate studies:

- A study involving 1,700 patients who'd had a heart attack and took either a multivitamin or a placebo, which found that those who took the vitamins were no less likely to have another heart attack or some other kind of cardiovascular event.
- A study involving 6,000 older men, which found that Centrum Silver taken daily didn't help them improve cognitive thinking.
- A meta-analysis of 27 other studies that examined more than 400,000 healthy subjects, which found that multivitamins didn't lengthen lives or prevent cancer or heart disease.

But is that what we're asking multivitamins to do: prevent serious diseases?

“Those really weren't the best questions to be asking about vitamins,” says Frances A. Journak, a professor of physics and biophysics at the UC Irvine School of Medicine. She's studied vitamins for years, and has been amazed at how little training physicians actually get on them.

“Any vitamin teaching got phased out in the 1970s” in medical school, she said.

Jurnak points out that none of the studies in *Annals* determined that multivitamins actually are harmful. With that in mind, she found it odd that the editorial concludes “illogically and contra to the published data that vitamin supplementation should be stopped because it has the potential for causing harm,” as she wrote in an email.

The safest way to get the daily dose of necessary nutrients is through food. “Unfortunately, that’s not possible with some people,” Jurnak said. “Some people need more of something. Some people don’t eat a proper diet.”

Taking vitamins does have the potential to cause harm, she said, but only if taken improperly. Taking too much of one compound could create a deficiency of another. For instance, too much B1 could lead to magnesium deficiency.

She said the first two studies in *Annals* tried dosages that were too low to have any effect, and the third study, the meta-analysis, looked at individual vitamins as well as multivitamins.

“Nutrients work together with other nutrients and must be administered in certain combinations to avoid harmful effects,” she wrote, adding that “the proper ratios ... are studied extensively by the vitamin companies.”

More research is needed to understand the mechanisms at work with how the body metabolizes vitamins and minerals, Agus said. “Humans are very complex mechanisms,” he said.

Until then, consult your doctor before taking any supplement.

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