



April 3, 2010 – Grand Rapids, MI

Vitamin Scam

Whenever I get more than 10 e-mails that ask the same basic question, it's time for me to write about the subject because if 10 people ask, there are 10 times that many who are wondering. Such is the case with a recent article in *Reader's Digest* called "5 Vitamin Truths and Lies" written by Christie Aschwanden (1). In the article, the author talks about five myths of taking vitamins. I'll cover each so-called myth briefly and give my opinion on what was written.

The Five Myths

"A Multivitamin Can Make Up for a Bad Diet"

The author quotes from Marian Neuhouser, PhD, the lead scientist in several cancer-prevention trials. The data presented were taken from the Women's Health Initiative and showed that taking a multivitamin did not prevent getting or dying from degenerative diseases such as heart disease, stroke, or cancer (2). That appears to be true. However, they didn't provide vitamins, just asked the type of supplement used at the beginning of the study. The criterion for being considered a vitamin user was taking the supplement at least once a week; the subjects just told the researchers what their typical pattern of use was. I think you can see the problem.

But what Neuhouser was quoted as saying was interesting: "Multivitamins have maybe two dozen ingredients—but plants have hundreds of other useful compounds. If you just take a multivitamin, you're missing lots of compounds that may be providing benefits." Two points: First, her comment about those compounds was not examined in the study; she's correct about what's in plants, but she commented on what she didn't test. Secondly, that's a very good reason for taking a multivitamin that contains whole-plant concentrates. The other compounds, formally known as phytonutrients, are in multivitamins that contain plant concentrates.

"Vitamin C Is a Cold Fighter"

Aschwanden refers to a meta-analysis of vitamin C, which she didn't cite, that examined the research on vitamin C and cold prevention. The researchers said that it works in only three groups of people: marathoners, skiers, and soldiers on subarctic exercises. In other words, in people who were under very stressful conditions. It would seem that the study proves that vitamin C does work if you take it as you enter stressful conditions—for example, if you're getting married next week or if you're an accountant and the income tax deadline is fast approaching. Waiting until you feel the symptoms may be too late. While vitamin C does reduce the duration of a cold, the researchers concluded it's neither worth the effort nor the expense. Says who? It would seem that if you recover from a cold a day or two sooner, it gets you back into the game of life faster. Seems like a good thing to me. Who would choose to be sick longer?

"Vitamin Pills Can Prevent Heart Disease"

In yet another series of studies that used meta-analyses, and which she didn't cite, Aschwanden makes the conclusion that none of them showed any protective effect of any vitamins. Note that this is the second time I said that the author didn't provide the citations; that makes it difficult to verify whether the conclusions the researchers arrived at were accurate or not.

The real problem with meta-analyses is that researchers combine data from studies that did not use the exact same procedures; some might have used more vitamin E than others or had subjects who were at various stages of disease. I've read several of those studies, and that really presents a problem if the authors don't combine only studies with similar procedures. The approach is justified to get large groups of subjects—I get that. But there's a big difference if one study uses 1,000 IU synthetic vitamin E while another uses 400 IU natural vitamin E.

But the biggest problem is with the research model: the scientists still think of using supplements to treat a disease. That's not what vitamins do.

“Taking Vitamins Can Protect Against Cancer”

Aschwanden again uses research from Dr. Neuhouser's study as well as other uncited research to assert that taking supplements does not reduce the rate of cancer. Interesting, because in a study published in March, researchers used meta-analyses on studies with vitamin B6 intake and showed that as vitamin B6 intake increased, the risk of colorectal cancer decreased (3). So that's one study that used the same statistical technique and found a benefit. Maybe she should have waited a month to publish her article.

“Hey, It Can't Hurt”

Before I even started reading this section, I knew that she would bring up the beta-carotene study on cigarette smokers. The researchers stopped the study because there was a slight increase in the rate of lung cancer in those subjects who supplemented with 30 mg beta-carotene. True—but what she doesn't say is that it was only the subjects who smoked the most cigarettes and drank alcohol regularly whose rate increased. Let's get real—if you're smoking and drinking a lot, vitamins are the least of your problems.

On top of that, they used synthetic beta-carotene in the study; that's important because it's not metabolized the same way. If they had used natural beta-carotene, the same kind that's found in the fruits and vegetables that inspired them to do the study in the first place, the results might have been completely different.

If it were even remotely possible that taking vitamins is harmful, there would be hundreds of studies detailing the risks. They don't exist—so this is one “myth” that remains totally un-busted. In fact I stand by what I've said before: taking a multi every day is a fantastic idea and everyone should do it, not because it can't hurt, but because it can help.

The Bottom Line

Magazines run articles with controversial titles all the time because they increase sales. Isn't Elvis still alive? After all, he was spotted at a McDonald's recently, wasn't he? But provocative titles don't guarantee the author has anything important to say.

Nutrition research is complicated and in order to be fair, you have to present all sides so people can understand the issues. While *Reader's Digest* and other magazines may not do that, I'll keep giving you the real story. In this case, I'm still taking my vitamins and minerals because nothing presented in this article changed my mind, and I'd recommend you stick with your supplements as well.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

P.S. Starting this month, I'll be sending you one or two promotional e-mails every month; all the information you get from me in Messages and other health info will continue to be free, but I need to pay the bills just like you do. The products I offer have one goal: to help you, your family, and your friends get healthier. So keep an eye out for special offers, including the April Fools Day Special that's available through this weekend.

References:

1. Christie Aschwanden. 5 Vitamin Truths and Lies. *Reader's Digest* April 2010.
2. *Arch Intern Med.* 2009;169(3):294-304.
3. *JAMA.* 2010 Mar 17;303(11):1077-83.

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