



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
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“Fruit and Vegetables May Not Dramatically Reduce Disease”

Here we go again. New studies may be exposing another "medical myth." Investigators, writing in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, are now telling us that fruits and vegetables do not dramatically lower the risk of common diseases, including cancer. Since the early 1980s, the dietary guidelines for Americans, published jointly by the USDA and the DHHS, have reflected the accumulated scientific research concerning diet and health. Early 1980 guidelines pertaining to nutrition and cancer were to "eat a variety of foods" and "eat foods with adequate starch and fiber." In 1990, "eat a variety of foods" remained a guideline but "choose a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruits, and grain products" replaced the starch and fiber reference. This mirrored the growing data suggesting a lowered risk of cancer with increased vegetable and fruit consumption. But, in 1995, grain products were placed ahead of vegetables and fruit in the guidelines to better reflect the structure of the USDA food pyramid. Other recommendations included the 1989 National Research Council *Diet and Health* report supporting consumption of 5 fruit and vegetable servings per day and the 1991 National Cancer Institute–DHHS sponsorship of the 5-A-Day Program. Public health guidelines for food oriented toward high vegetable and fruit consumption continued up to the present. This scenario led to the rising popularity of vitamin supplements from the 1980s until today, but there have been huge problems with these trends. First, the vitamin supplements were shown to lack the effect of vitamins acquired through the diet and second, vitamins A (beta carotene) and E (alpha tocopherol) were shown to have particularly harmful potential. For in depth discussions, see www.iwillfindthecure.org. Yet, recommendations promoting vegetable and fruit consumption remained a center piece, until now. A study of 500,000 Europeans joins a growing body of evidence undermining the high hopes that pushing "five-a-day" might slash Western cancer rates and it estimated that only around 2.5% of cancers could be averted by increasing fruit and vegetable intake. In short, research has failed to substantiate the suggestion that as many as 50% of cancers could be prevented by boosting the public's consumption of fruit and vegetables.

In the America that I love, randomized intervention trials enlisting millions of participants have demonstrated the ineffectiveness and potential harm of supplemental vitamins A and E. This entire body of evidence has to be reinterpreted and we must open our minds to the results and not be misled by aggressive marketing and advertising. It appears that the kind of people who ate more fruit and vegetables lived healthier lives in many other respects too, which was the basis for any lowered rates of chronic diseases. Still, I believe that fresh fruits and vegetables are overall darned good for us.

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