Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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"Vitamin D3 Update Reveals Inconsistencies"

Vitamin D 3 is a hot topic, with studies proclaiming its benefits for a variety of serious conditions. To the contrary, other recent studies have been more cautious, questioning its perceived usefulness. Vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol, the form we use in the body), which helps with calcium absorption, has been reported as being of overall benefit to good health. It is found in cod liver oil and has been fortified in milk since 1933 to prevent rickets. Sunlight activates the synthesis of vitamin D in the skin, and people who get little sun exposure have lower stores of the vitamin. Sunlight is the best source of vitamin D, but in the winter months, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommend topping up vitamin D levels by eating vitamin D-containing foods each day. These include oily fish, fortified milk, beef liver, egg yolks, mushrooms, and fortified breakfast cereals. Patients with higher vitamin D levels have been shown to have lower rates of breast, colon, ovarian, prostate, pancreatic and lymphomatous cancers and vitamin D helps prevent cancer cells from growing and spreading. Overall, clinical trials in which people were given high doses of vitamin D showed lower risks of cancer, arthritis and diabetes. Studies are also suggesting that vitamin D might have protective benefits against heart failure, respiratory tract infections, autoimmune disease, and even hair loss. However, a 2018 randomized controlled study of over 47,000 patients, reported in *JAMA Oncology*, found that high-dose vitamin D supplementation prescribed monthly for up to 4 years without calcium may not protect against the development of cancer. Still, breast cancer and bowel cancer have both been linked with cases of vitamin D deficiency in recent studies. One of these analyzed data from two randomized clinical trials and a prospective cohort study. The researchers found that high levels of vitamin D lowered the risk of breast cancer among women who were cancer-free at baseline. Even though several studies have suggested that vitamin D could offer protective benefits against cardiovascular illness, scientists have yet to pinpoint what mechanisms are driving this association. A surprisingly large number of people have insufficient levels of vitamin D. For instance, according to one study, more than 40% of adults in the United States are deficient. Symptoms of vitamin D deficiency can vary between individuals, but they typically include pain in the joints, muscles, or bones; fatigue; breathing problems; and low mood or seasonal affective disorder (SAD). A systematic review from researchers in Australia recently concluded that there was no significant association between vitamin D deficiency and risk of Alzheimer's.

In the America that I love, these findings still need to be confirmed in large, randomized clinical trials before we can rely on them.

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