

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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## “Vitamin D and Fish Oil of Little Benefit in Heart Disease, Cancer”

More research is showing no significant benefit from vitamin D supplementation for the prevention of cardiovascular disease (CVD) or cancer and little benefit from omega-3 supplements. The Vitamin D and Omega-3 Trial (VITAL) is one of the largest randomized, placebo-controlled trials to examine these associations. The study comprised almost 26,000 participants. The two primary outcome measures were invasive cancer of any type and major CVD events, which was a composite of stroke, myocardial infarction (MI), and CVD-related death. Neither the participants who received vitamin D3 nor those who received 1 g of marine n-3 fatty acids (omega-3) per day showed significantly lower incidence of either outcome over 5 years of follow-up. However, there was a 28% reduction in risk for myocardial infarction (MI) alone in the full group receiving omega-3 and a 77% reduction in MI risk among black participants in the omega-3 group. This may point to a very promising approach to reducing coronary risk among African Americans. But overall the results were not impressive with any of the primary findings and only showed marginal benefits in "sub-analyses or in secondary endpoints," which are not reliable scientific evidence of benefit. Importantly, no significant adverse events occurred with either agent, including no increased risk for hypercalcemia with vitamin D and no increased risk for bleeding with omega-3. Jane Armitage, MD, University of Oxford, United Kingdom, noted that although this was a well-conducted and well-powered study with an ethnically diverse population and good follow-up, "it was robustly negative" overall. Armitage said, "I think we need to accept that this was a good test of the hypothesis that universal supplementation with a decent dose of vitamin D is not worthwhile." As for the fish oil study, Armitage said, "The negative endpoint of major CVD events overall in the current study was a good test of the hypothesis and pretty much refutes the benefits that were observed in fish oil observational studies." But, experts said this trial was "important" and said they were glad that it was conducted, especially because of the large number of Americans who are taking vitamin D everyday with the hope that it will protect against cancer or CVD. Further, they said, "The idea that low vitamin D is somehow bad may just be a reflection that people with low vitamin D don't get enough sun or don't get out enough and exercise. We don't know the answer, but we do know that giving vitamin D in this very large, very well-done study didn't show any benefits." Please check out my book, *"Fish oils (omega-3 fatty acids): Facts, Fantasies and Failures"* available at amazon.com.

In the America that I love, it is becoming harder to know what to believe.

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