

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

March 3, 2019

“Dietary Supplement Sales Soar With No Scientific Proof”

There is a mountain of failed studies on the benefits of dietary supplements, but people continue to buy them by the bucket loads and gobble them down. Americans spend about \$40 billion annually, as global sales reach \$133 billion. But why? In 1996, the Physicians' Health Study randomly gave men beta-carotene or placebo for 12 years and showed no difference in cardiovascular disease (CVD), or for that matter in malignant neoplasms or overall mortality. In fact, other evidence showed that beta-carotene might actually increase the risk for lung cancer in smokers. The Women's Health Study of almost 40,000 women older than 45 years compared beta-carotene with placebo and also found no benefit in terms of stroke, myocardial infarction, or cardiovascular death. The evidence for vitamin C and vitamin E has been equally disappointing, despite great hope that as antioxidants, they would have some benefit. The second Physicians' Health Study compared vitamin E, vitamin C, or both against placebo in over 14,500 men and found no reduction in stroke, myocardial infarction, or cardiovascular mortality. The Women's Antioxidant Cardiovascular Study tested beta-carotene, vitamin C, and vitamin E in 8,171 women over 9 years of follow-up and also found no benefit. The ability of folic acid to lower homocysteine levels initially held promise, but subsequent reviews showed it was not associated with a reduction in CVD. The extra-skeletal benefits of vitamin D supplementation were all the rage for a while, but recently the VIDA study failed to show a cardiovascular benefit for vitamin D, and the VITAL study is presumably the final nail in the coffin for the sunshine vitamin. In their 2013 review of all the evidence, the US Preventive Services Task Force concluded that there was no benefit to vitamin supplementation, which prompted the editorial "Enough Is Enough: Stop Wasting Money on Vitamin and Mineral Supplements." Negative trials, such as ASCEND, VITAL, and a large Cochrane Collaboration meta-analysis showing no cardiovascular benefit, are unlikely to dent sales. Omega-3 supplements are one of the fastest growing and most popular supplements on the market; fish oil sales increased 10-fold between 1999 and 2012, whereas vitamin D use merely quadrupled. So, why do so many people take these expensive ineffective pills? Overall, it seems that many people use vitamins and supplements because they believe that it will make them healthier. Older adults are concerned about their health; therefore, vitamins serve to promote health. Younger adults are concerned about performance; therefore, vitamins and supplements serve to boost sport performance. But little research supports the use of antioxidant supplements containing greater amounts than those available from a nutritionally adequate diet.

In the America that I love, please spend your hard-earned money on things that actually work.

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