

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“The Multivitamin Myth”

About one-third of Americans routinely take multivitamins in the belief that they contribute to good health. The real concern is that people are wasting money on multivitamins that would better benefit their health if spent elsewhere. As Will Rogers said, "It's about spending money you don't have for something you don't need." Most experts seriously doubt the "claimed benefits" of these multivitamin supplements and they have found the harmful potential of many of them, including multivitamins. Cases in point, new studies have linked heavy multivitamin use to fatal prostate cancer, increased breast tissue density (associated with breast cancer), and increased allergies and asthma in children. Cancer experts say multivitamins are far less effective than a good diet, exercise and not smoking, each of which can lower cancer risk by 20% to 30%. Research has shown that the best way to obtain the nutrients and minerals you need is through food. When vitamins and minerals have been studied independent of a food, they don't have the same benefit. Still, U.S. adults who regularly take multivitamins self-reported 30% better overall health than people who don't use the supplements. However, a comprehensive medical history—assessing dozens of physical and mental illnesses—revealed zero actual health differences between people who did or did not take multivitamins. So, the effect seems to be a placebo or all in their head. Prior studies have found little evidence to support any benefit from multivitamins for an array of health problems ranging from heart disease to cancer. The primary role of a multivitamin is to fill nutritional gaps and make sure people get their daily allowance of under-consumed nutrients like vitamins A, C, D, E and K, calcium, magnesium, dietary fiber, choline and potassium. Not all supplements are considered to be a waste of money. For example, during pregnancy folic acid is commonly prescribed to prevent neural tube defects in the child. Also, people with known vitamin deficiencies or with a malabsorption disorder may need vitamin supplementation. Researcher Manish Paranjpe has said, “For the general population who have no specific condition that would require a multivitamin or specific vitamin supplement, we really have no evidence to suggest that taking a daily multivitamin helps in any way.” Experts have found that multivitamin and mineral supplementation has not been associated with lower mortality due to cardiovascular disease (CVD), coronary heart disease (CHD), or stroke, nor with incidence of stroke.

In the America that I love, I urge you to get your vitamins from fresh foods and vegetables, not supplements. Please spend your money on things that we know have a positive health benefit, such as eating a healthy diet, exercising, stopping smoking, avoiding excessive weight gain and limiting alcohol consumption.

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