

Charlotte WEEKLY

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Guest column

Supplemental nutrition

Think twice before popping pills

by Michael Smith

With so many nutritional supplements on the market, many people are thoroughly confused about which ones they should take. Some people take too many supplements, others take the *wrong* ones, and still others take nothing at all. Does the typical diet really need to be supplemented with pills? Why are there so many supplements, and how can a consumer tell which ones are beneficial and which are harmful?

Eating well

Unequivocally, food is the best source of the nutrients your body needs. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains are full of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytonutrients essential to health. If you consume a diet of fresh, locally grown foods that is mostly plant based with lots of variety daily, you probably don't need nutritional supplements.

Unfortunately, most people don't eat a well-balanced diet and therefore miss important nutrients every day. If you're not eating as well as you should, consider a supplement made from food rather than one crafted in a lab. It's impossible to replicate nature, but choosing a food-derived supplement will ensure you receive the best nutrient forms in the proper combination. Read labels and look for quality controls such as third-party testing and additive-free ingredients.

Vitamins in isolation

Several recent studies indicate that high-potency, single-isolate vitamin nutrients aren't always helpful and might even be harmful. The February 2007 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* included results from a meta-analysis of 385 published medical studies involving more than

230,000 participants. The research found an increased mortality rate among those who took large amounts of high-potency multivitamins – namely, beta-carotene and vitamins A and E. This is not to say high-potency vitamins cause death, but there is a significant difference between digesting vitamins in their isolated form and digesting them in food. Eating carrots or bell peppers with their high amounts of vitamins A and C and beta-carotene is no cause for concern. The forms of these vitamins in food, along with the thousands of phytonutrients that accompany them, allow the body to best absorb nutrients and protect health.

No single vitamin will provide better health. Rather, the complexity of hundreds – possibly thousands – of biochemical reactions in the body provides health benefits. Single vitamins most certainly can push these biochemical pathways in the body, but do they push them in a positive direction? Maybe not.

Heed interaction, address depletion

Another, more alarming study in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* last year concluded that men taking multivitamins had an increased risk of advanced and fatal prostate cancer diagnoses.

People often incorrectly assume a supplement that's natural *must* be safe. Yet, various nutrients and herbs interact with prescription drugs, making it crucial for anyone taking supplements *and* medications to inform his or her doctor of every substance being taken.

Prescription drugs can deplete your body of certain nutrients. For example, birth control pills and other estrogens from hormone replacement can deplete your body of important B6 vitamins. Consider replacing these with sunflower seeds or wheat germ. Other good sources include beans, seeds, nuts or whole-grain products.

Individuals who take prescription medication regularly should consider replacing lost nutrients with whole-food sources rich in a combination of nutrients such as dark green, leafy vegetables, including kale, mustard greens, Swiss chard, beet greens and green-leaf or red-leaf lettuce. Adding more fruits and vegetables can be extremely beneficial and offers minimal side effects.

Certain herbal medicines have well-known interactions with drugs, either increasing or decreasing the drug's efficacy. One common herb, St. John's wort or *Hypericum perforatum*, has known interactions with many prescription drugs, including those used for depression.

It's critical to discuss supplements with a qualified health care professional to determine whether possible interactions are cause for concern. Few medical practitioners are trained to understand the indications, contraindications and interactions of nutritional supplements, herbal medicines and drugs. Naturopathic physicians and some pharmacists are good resources for advice.

Stay balanced

Too often, people prefer to take a pill rather than take responsibility for their health. Good health begins with good nutrition, which means consuming mostly unpackaged, unprocessed foods such as whole fruits and vegetables. Without a balanced diet, the body struggles to keep disease at bay.

If you need to enhance the nutrients you receive from whole foods, be sure to consider whether the supplement you choose is made from food. Remember, the word is "supplement," not replacement! By no means does popping a pill take the place of a healthy diet. □

Smith, a naturopathic physician with Carolinas Natural Health Center in Matthews, specializes in classical homeopathy and clinical nutrition. To learn more, call 704-708-4404.

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