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**Dietary supplements
are not a substitute
for good food.**

Supplement Shortfall

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**Great claims have
been made for
antioxidants.**

Up to 40 percent of Americans take vitamin pills and herbal supplements every day in an attempt to enjoy better health. They seek ways to cure their sore joints, headaches, constant fatigue, anxiety and depression. They also seek help with their weight problems. The marketplace provides hundreds of supplements for sale. Exuberant claims are made, inviting the consumer to enjoy greater well-being. Sales from supplements now exceed \$20 billion annually in the U.S.

A number of food products and supplements contain claims touting the value of their antioxidant content to protect us against a host of diseases. Our bodies use the antioxidant vitamins A, C and E, and a host of flavonoids, to fight damaging free radicals. Long-term studies conducted to see if increased doses of vitamins A, C and E would provide extra disease-fighting protection gave disappointing results.

This led the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society to advise people not to use these supplements to prevent or treat cancer or cardiovascular disease. The various antioxidants in our food successfully work in concert and provide a dynamic defense system that is complex and requires far more than merely swallowing a few isolated vitamins.

Lutein, a carotenoid pigment found in broccoli, corn, kiwi fruit and spinach, appears to protect our eyes from sunlight damage. While food sources of lutein lower the risk of eye diseases (cataracts and age-related macular degeneration), lutein supplements do not appear to provide the same protection.

Eating whole foods and foods fortified with vitamins and minerals certainly helps to ensure good nutrition. Having a shortfall in any nutrient can be rectified by taking a low-dose multivitamin and mineral supplement. However, as Jeffrey B. Blumberg, Ph.D., a professor at Tufts University, says, dietary supplements should not become dietary substitutes.



When elderly adults in Britain were asked to increase their intake of fruits, vegetables and nuts and to eat only whole-grain bread for three months, they showed an improved immune function. They reported significantly fewer doctor and hospital visits, and fewer weeks affected by illness than they did before making these dietary changes. A vitamin/mineral supplement provided similar changes, but the infections were of shorter duration for the elderly who made the improvement to their diet.

Taking some supplements may be necessary. As we get older, we are less able to absorb vitamin B12 and produce vitamin D from sunlight, so taking vitamin D and B12 supplements is appropriate for the elderly. Older adults who have vitamin D deficiency are recommended to take supplements of D to lower fracture risk, strengthen muscles and improve balance.

Not all supplements provide the benefits that are claimed for them. For example, ginkgo is added to many beverages as a memory-boosting supplement. However, research to support such claims is hard to find.

Snake oil salesmen have been around for centuries, boasting healing properties for a wide range of products. The extracts, creams and pills may be different today, but they are still pedaled with the promise of improved health.

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