

Long-term studies show little benefit from vitamin, mineral supplements

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Karen Kaplan, Los Angeles Times

Plain old vitamins were some of the most promising medicines of the 1990s – wonder pills that appeared to fight cancer, heart disease, stroke and other ailments.

Laboratory tests and initial studies in people suggested that vitamins could play a crucial role in preventing some of the most stubborn illnesses, especially in an aging population. The National Institutes of Health gave them the same treatment as top-notch pharmaceuticals, investing hundreds of millions of dollars in trials designed to quantify their disease-fighting abilities.

The results are rolling in, and nearly all of them fail to show any benefit from taking vitamins and minerals.

This month, two long-term trials involving more than 50,000 participants offered fresh evidence that vitamin C, vitamin E and selenium supplements don't reduce the risk of prostate, colorectal, lung, bladder or pancreatic cancers. Other studies have found that over-the-counter vitamins and minerals offered no help in fighting other cancers, strokes and cardiovascular disease.

Research has even suggested that, in some circumstances, vitamin and mineral supplements can be unsafe.

Some physicians now advise their patients not to bother with the pills and to rely instead on a healthy diet to provide needed vitamins and minerals.

"These things are ineffective, and in high doses they can cause harm," said Edgar Miller, a professor of medicine and epidemiology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "People are unhappy with their diets, they're stressed out, and they think it will help. It's just wishful thinking."

Scientists remain convinced that vitamins are essential to health. But they have puzzled over how their obvious benefits could be so elusive in randomized controlled trials.

"You really do need vitamin E. You really do need vitamin C. You really do need selenium," said Jeffrey Blumberg, director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Antioxidants Research Laboratory. "Without them, you die."

Dr. Blumberg and others now believe that a combination of factors – including the versions of vitamins tested and the populations they were tested in – probably doomed the studies from the start. "In retrospect, maybe the expectations were a little bit unrealistic," said Dr. Blumberg, whose work has been funded in part by supplement makers.

Rita's Note: The "missing ingredient" is the synergy of those vitamins and minerals as they are found IN the whole foods, not taken FROM them and put into an isolated nutrient pill. Are you getting 9-13 servings of a wide variety of fresh, raw fruits, vegetables, grapes and berries...every day? If so, you're right on track. If not, I can help with the "next best thing".

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