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Should We Take Supplements?

In December the New York Times ran an opinion piece titled "Don't Take Your Vitamins". It cited 3 studies and concluded that supplements "do not prevent chronic disease or prevent death". In the US, 1 out of 2 adults take at least 1 supplement daily. Forty percent of adult men and women take a daily multi-vitamin. I believe there's a good reason Americans spend 30 billion dollars a year on supplements.

In my 23 years of practice, I've checked my patients' blood levels of various nutrients such as D3, magnesium, zinc, B12, folate, calcium, potassium and iron, to name a few, and found deficiencies. I've prescribed multiple vitamins, specific nutrients and, of course, a plan for a better diet. I've observed that with these changes, patients become and stay healthier.

My observations have been borne out by prolific research in respectable medical journals, none of which the New York Times mentioned. Here are two studies that I've found very interesting.

The Journal of American Medicine, JAMA, published the Physician's Health Study in 2012. Physicians who took a multi-vitamin for an average of 11.2 years had statistically less cancer incidence compared to those physicians who took a placebo.

A 2010 American Journal of Clinical Nutrition study followed 31,000 woman ages 49 to 83, who were without a history of cardiovascular disease. The study compared the cardiovascular health of women who took a multi-vitamin for 5 years to those who did not. The women taking a multi-vitamin had a 40% reduced risk of having heart attacks.

These are observational studies. This means taking multiple vitamins appears to be associated with certain health benefits but it doesn't imply simple direct cause and effect. I've observed from my practice that the quality of the vitamin, mineral and herbal supplement makes a big difference to my patients' therapeutic response. I carry specific brands of supplements in my pharmacy because I can rely on their quality and effectiveness.

Patients purchasing others supplements are advised to avoid any that contain certain substances because they may have possible negative effects on human health.

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The following is a short list of supplement ingredients to avoid:

- Synthetic dyes that include FD&C colors: red, blue & yellow. These are made from coal tar and may cause cancer.
- Synthetic C d l alpha tocopherol which is vitamin E. Natural vitamin E has 8 forms including d alpha tocopherol. A supplement should include d alpha tocopherol with other mixed tocopherols.
- Polyethylene glycol is a preservative and a type of anti-freeze that is supposedly safe for human consumption, hmm..
- Cyanocobalamin is a synthetic B12 that contains cyanide. It's controversial if the amount of cyanide in these supplements is problematic but other forms of B12 are better any way. Methyl or hydroxyl cobalamin are safe forms of B12 to take.

There are some reputable commercial brands of vitamins such as: Natural Factors, Rainbow Light, Pure Encapsulations and Innate. These are available in health food stores and on line. It's best to review your supplements at least once yearly with your health care provider.

So, yes, I do recommend a good low dose multi-vitamin and omega 3 fish oil to most of my patients, but the most important thing we can do to be healthy, besides living a joyful life, is to eat a clean, unprocessed nutritious diet. Many of my patients have heard me say "Unless we eat the right way, all the supplements we take, are only a drop in the bucket for improving our health".