
Nutritionist Says Wall Street Journal Wrong on Vitamins

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"The Case Against Vitamins, an article by the Wall Street Journal which originally ran on March 20, 2006 and is being widely reprinted, should be thrown out of court," says Neil Levin, a Chicago-area Certified Clinical Nutritionist. "The danger here is that a reporter who is neither a nutritionist nor a doctor may dissuade people from utilizing products which can help them maintain their health. And that is harmful."

There is an understandable tendency for the media to embrace controversial stories in an environment where a single study is touted as negating all other studies, even though rogue studies are usually deeply flawed. The "several studies" cited in this report have been seriously criticized by experts without their rebuttals resulting in any real effort to set the record straight, Levin points out.

Provocative reports get wide coverage, but not the subsequent, legitimate criticism of the studies. This leads to public confusion about supplements and fuels a growing mistrust of the reliability of media reports on all nutrition topics. Levin says that dietary supplements are singled out as being harmful or useless, or both at once, when these accusations are often not supported by good data.

"This WSJ article singled out beta-carotene as promoting cancer, mentioning a study on Finnish smokers. Yet that study's data was recently reanalyzed, with researchers looking instead at total antioxidant intake. They discovered that low antioxidant intake was the real culprit in that original cancer study, not beta-carotene supplementation," Levin said.

The article reported that antioxidants may "promote some cancer and interfere with treatments." The peer-reviewed journal CA from the American Cancer Society published (online) Levin's analysis documenting dozens of studies proving that specific vitamins and antioxidants actually enhanced medical cancer therapies.

Many negative studies state that their results are not applicable to populations other than the ones studied, yet get wide press coverage positioned as being universally definitive. And evidence that the researchers and the WSJ admit is "inconclusive" is still publicized as an argument against taking Vitamin E, which Levin stresses is a safe and effective nutritional supplement.

"The Vitamin E controversy should have been cleared up after the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition did a far more thorough review than the handful of studies used in the Annals of Internal Medicine review article," Levin says. "Annals has, to its credit, published dozens of critical comments from physicians and scientists, including mine. The vastly more authoritative AJCN report, "Vitamins E and C Are Safe Across A Broad Range Of Intakes", determined that the Annals data indicated problems only in doses over 2,000 IU; not the 400 IU widely reported. The Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine has set the safe, upper tolerable intake level for vitamin E at 1,500 IU daily. Research shows that Vitamin E may be useful for people suffering from Parkinson's, macular degeneration, cataracts, cancer and mercury toxicity. The substantial body of evidence supporting supplements may not sell papers the way controversial studies do, but it is weighty."

Reports that 'B-Vitamins don't lower risk for heart attacks' miss the point entirely, according to Levin. Vitamins do lower levels of homocysteine, an inflammatory substance, and reduce the number of non-fatal strokes. Homocysteine as a theoretical cause of heart disease is being challenged, but the B-Vitamins performed exactly as predicted.

The well-respected Lewin Group has published reports showing that proper use of supplementation can save billions of dollars in health care costs while reducing pain and suffering. There are FDA-approved health claims for vitamins and minerals supported by solid scientific claims. The total body of evidence supports benefits of dietary supplementation. The risk of being hurt by a vitamin is so low as to be unquantifiable, far less than the risk from contracting a food borne illness or from taking a pharmaceutical or OTC product like acetaminophen. "That's the real truth about vitamins," Levin concludes.

Neil Levin, CCN, DANLA, is nutrition education manager at Bloomingdale, Illinois based NOW Foods, Inc. and works to dispel inaccurate health information.