



# Nutrition Nuggets



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## Multivitamins- Are they Protective?

Annual sales of supplements in the United States are now topping \$23 billion. The majority are vitamins and minerals which are taken by more than half of American adults. For most users, multivitamin/mineral (MVM) supplements represent a magic bullet - lending hope for more energy, health improvement and disease prevention.

### Truth Revealed

In view of the high economic stakes, many high caliber, multi-year studies have been conducted over the past 30 years in an effort to determine preventive benefits for various vitamins and minerals. As recently as 2002, the American Medical Association recommended that "all adults take one multivitamin daily". However, the virtual tsunami of current scientific data has resulted in reversal of thinking among many experts in health and nutrition.

In 2003, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force issued a report concluding an exhaustive investigation on the effects of vitamin supplementation on cancer and heart disease rates. Upon review of numerous studies, they stated the evidence is insufficient to recommend supplemental vitamin A, C, E, beta carotene, multivitamins or antioxidants for prevention of chronic disease.

Miriam Nelson, PhD, director of the Research Center on Physical Activity, Nutrition, and Obesity at Tufts University flatly states, "The multivitamin as insurance policy is an old wives' tale and we need to debunk it." Not only does research not support a protective effect from vitamin/mineral supplements, in a number of cases they were found to increase risk of certain cancers and hemorrhagic stroke. (See Resources for specific studies and nutrients.)

### What Does Protect?

Population studies worldwide show that people who consume a natural, plant-based diet with little meat have significantly lower risk for degenerative diseases such as cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, seeds and nuts contain many thousands of nutritional components. These include vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, enzymes, fiber and healthful phytochemicals (plant chemicals). All these components work together, maximizing intestinal absorption and our body's effective utilization of nutrients.

MVM's are a recent dietary phenomenon that's a poor match for the requirements of our digestive system. Our intestinal tract is designed to recognize and absorb minute amounts of many thousands of nutrients in the complex, synergistic arrangements found in natural foods. The foreign material of a multi-vitamin with its isolated, synthetic chemicals is not something the body can easily absorb and utilize.

### Natural Benefits

In the United States, a diet of highly processed and refined foods together with excessive animal protein has supplanted the majority of whole plant foods. The diet of average Americans today is well established as a leading contributor to morbidity from its deficiencies in the micronutrients and fiber found in unrefined plant foods as well as the inflammatory excesses of refined carbohydrate (sugar and white flour) and animal fats. We are an overfed, but undernourished society.

U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommends average adults consume 8-10 servings of fruits and vegetables along with 3 servings of whole grains. Following this and the other healthy recommendations of our national dietary guidelines (including daily physical activity) are leading prevention strategies that reduce risk for many forms of chronic, degenerative disease including cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, arthritis and Alzheimer's.

### Advisable Supplements

Recent research points to two supplements that are needed by most Americans due to our indoor lives and changes in the food supply. Most people don't spend sufficient time in the sun to manufacture the recommended levels of vitamin D. Additionally, due to changes in agriculture, particularly livestock raising, wild salmon is the only food remaining in our modern diet that's rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Other fatty, cold water fish like mackerel, herring and sardines also contain omega-3's, but not nearly as much.

Consuming canned or other wild-caught salmon at least twice a week will provide adequate amounts of these essential fatty acids. Persons with cardiovascular disease require more and are advised by the American Heart Association to supplement with fish oil capsules. Both vitamin D and the omega-3 fats are highly anti-inflammatory and protective. (See the two earlier articles on Vitamin D published in Nutrition Nuggets).

Individuals who want to protect or improve their health are advised to eat a wide variety of whole plant foods, limit intake of animal products, exercise at least 30 minutes daily and employ stress management techniques. Practicing healthy habits on a daily basis is your best insurance for a long and productive life.

## RESOURCES

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