

## MARCH 2009 NEWSLETTER

Recently I read an article in the *New York Times* (February 17, 2009 edition) titled "Vitamin Pills: A False Hope?" that questioned the benefit of using a variety of nutritional supplements, including multi-vitamins, vitamins C and E and selenium. It reported the results of the recently published "Womens' Health Initiative" study that tracked multi-vitamin use among more than 161'000 women and found (contrary to previous study results) that multi-vitamin use did not decrease the incidence of certain cancers or heart disease. It also reported the results of other studies that found that vitamin C and E use did not decrease rates of cancer or heart disease in men, and vitamin E and selenium use did not reduce prostate cancer risk in men.

Should these findings be taken to mean that use of nutritional supplements has no health benefit? The short answer is "no".

Two explanations offered by researchers for the difficulty proving that high doses of individual nutrients (or certain combinations of nutrients) do not result in expected preventative health results include (1) that perhaps vitamins in "pill" form are not absorbed in the body in the same way as when eaten as foods. This is true in many cases. Many nutrients are best absorbed under certain conditions which may or may not be present when you have a vitamin as a pill. Vitamin D for example is absorbed approximately twice as efficiently if taken with a fatty food because it is fat soluble. This condition exists if your vitamin D comes from eating fish, liver or eggs, the richest foods sources of vitamin D, but not if you take a vitamin D pill with a glass of water; and (2) that when vitamins and minerals are studied, they can never actually be studied against placebo alone. When drug medications are evaluated, study subjects are divided into a group who will receive the medication, and a group who will receive a "fake medication" or placebo. If the group receiving the actual medication has appreciably better results than the placebo group, the medication is described as effective. Because participants in research trials are not starved (i.e., they are eating, for example, calcium as part of their regular diet) during an experiments evaluating calcium, calcium is never actually being measured against "no calcium".

A third, and from a holistic, naturopathic medicine perspective the most important reason that nutritional supplements can be beneficial for your health is that your body requires all nutrients to function, and for you to be healthy. Evaluating mega-doses of individual nutrients and expecting them to consistently yield positive results against specific conditions can be compared to not maintaining your car for years and then only filling the oil and expecting the car to run well. If the only problem that has developed over the years is low oil, then you will be pleased with the results, but generally a car needs full tires, gasoline in the tank and many other factors to be addressed to drive well. The same is true of your body. To the extent that the nutritional supplements you use contribute to your overall good health, they are contributing your ability to prevent and recover not from any specific illness, but from illness in general.

## IN THE NEWS ...

Sorry, no "In the News ..." in this months' newsletter, as my above "musings" went overlong, and really, were news-oriented.

## HEALTH TIP

This months' health tip is nutritional supplement-oriented. It is true that vitamins and minerals are all available in foods, and are often better absorbed in this form: So why use supplements? Du and I felt much the same way until we read the results of a 2006 study (*J Int Soc Sports Nutr*;3[1]:51-5) evaluating nutrient amounts people consumed in their daily diets. 0% of participants in this study consumed the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of nutrients. This is particularly notable as RDA values reflect not the amount of a nutrient required for optimal health, but the amount required to prevent "classical symptoms of deficiency", for example scurvy in the case of vitamin C. To use a financial analogy, this is comparable not to prosperity, not to debt, but rather to bankruptcy.

To ensure adequate, general nutriture, eat a balanced diet. A simple way to get started is by, at each "major" meal of the day including a palm-sized serving of protein (e.g., chicken), a palm-sized serving of "starch" (e.g., rice, sweet potato) and two handful-sized servings of vegetables or fruit. This model provides six daily servings of vegetables and fruit: Added to the two servings of vegetables or fruit we know you all have as mid-morning and afternoon snacks will provide the eight to ten recommended daily servings of vegetable and fruit, the main source of dietary vitamins and minerals.

Include a high-quality multi-vitamin to your regimen to account for any "blind spots" in your diet, throw in some vitamin D in the winter (see our "July 2008 Newsletter"), and you're off to a good start.