

Feds question vitamins' vitality

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A study finds little evidence to support the health claims of multivitamins.

Associated Press

WASHINGTON – More than half of U.S. adults use multivitamins, yet there's little evidence that most of the pills do any good, and concern that some people may even get a risky vitamin overload, advisers to the government said Wednesday.

Worried about bottles that promise 53 times the recommended daily consumption of certain nutrients, specialists convened by the National Institutes of Health called Wednesday for strengthened federal oversight of the \$23 billion dietary supplement industry, especially efforts to pin down side effects.

For the average healthy American, there's simply not enough evidence to tell if taking vitamins is a good or bad idea, said Dr. Michael McGinnis of the Institute of Medicine, who led the NIH panel's review.

"We don't know a great deal," he said, calling for more rigorous research.

Moreover, McGinnis added, "The product with which we're dealing is virtually unregulated," meaning there are even questions about how the bottles' labels convey what's really inside.

Vitamins and minerals, often packaged together, are the most-used dietary supplements, and widely assumed to be safe. After all, vitamins naturally occur in some of the healthiest foods, and vitamin deficiencies have been known to be dangerous since scurvy's link to a lack of fruits and vegetables was discovered centuries ago.

The NIH panel concluded the people most likely to have nutrient deficiencies are the least likely to use multivitamins.

Feds question vitamins' vitality

There are only a few proven disease-preventing supplements, the NIH panel concluded:

- * Women of childbearing age should take folic acid supplements to prevent spina bifida and related birth defects.
- * Calcium and vitamin D together protect the bones of postmenopausal women.
- * Antioxidants and zinc may slow the worsening of the blinding disease called age-related macular degeneration.

On the other hand, smokers should avoid taking beta-carotene supplements, because the pills can increase their risk of lung cancer, the report stresses.

For other vitamins, concern arises mainly with super doses that exceed the government's "recommended daily amount," or RDA. Between 1 percent and 11 percent of supplement users may be exceeding the upper limits set for certain nutrients, if they add together their doses from pills and their diets, said Cornell University nutritionist Patsy Brannon.

Too much niacin can damage the liver. Among other examples, too much vitamin A can cause birth defects, and too much vitamin E can cause bleeding problems. Some vitamins also can interact dangerously with medications, and doctors should ask their patients what they take, the NIH panel said.

If you choose to take vitamins, use those labeled with 100 percent of the RDA or "daily value," advised Brannon. Together with a good diet, that would provide most people plenty without getting near the upper limit.

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Feds question vitamins' vitality

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