

Don't Believe It

Donald M. Petersen Jr., BS, HCD(hc), FICC(h), Publisher

One of our staff came into my office last week, very concerned about [an article](#) she had just read on a news media website. The article suggested researchers found "no health benefits" associated with taking multivitamins.¹ The article was based on an editorial titled "Enough Is Enough: Stop Wasting Money on Vitamin and Mineral Supplements,"² written by five MDs who made some [startling statements](#):

- "Other reviews and guidelines that have appraised the role of vitamin and mineral supplements in primary or secondary prevention of chronic disease have consistently found null results or possible harms."
- "Evidence involving tens of thousands of people randomly assigned in many clinical trials shows that β -carotene, vitamin E, and possibly high doses of vitamin A supplements increase mortality and that other antioxidants, folic acid and B vitamins, and multivitamin supplements have no clear benefit."
- "Most supplements do not prevent chronic disease or death, their use is not justified, and they should be avoided."
- "Antioxidants, folic acid, and B vitamins are harmful or ineffective for chronic disease prevention, and further large prevention trials are no longer justified."
- "With respect to multivitamins, the studies published in this issue and previous trials indicate no substantial health benefit. This evidence, combined with biological considerations, suggests that any effect, either beneficial or harmful, is probably small."
- "These vitamins should not be used for chronic disease prevention. Enough is enough."

At this point in the conversation, it should probably be noted that one of the authors was being paid as a "consultant on a class action lawsuit related to false health claims made by vitamin E manufacturer." Something the news folks apparently missed.

There are several important points you (and particularly your patients) need to understand about these statements.

- *This is an editorial*, not a research paper. The authors rounded up three studies that supported their position and presented them in support of said position.
- *The media has no memory*. While seemingly authoritative, our news media has no memory when it comes to research. These same [news outlets announced](#), "Multivitamin Use Linked to Lowered Cancer Risk"³ just a year before. There is seemingly no awareness of a continuity in reporting results.
- *Other research doesn't agree*. One of the more [recent studies](#) published in *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment* found that "in adjusted analyses, breast cancer mortality was 30% lower in MVM [multivitamins with minerals supplements] users as compared to non-users."⁴
- *Your patients don't read research well*. Because they don't understand the vernacular or the research process, most of your patients will likely jump to conclusions before they finish the news story, let alone ever read the actual research paper. You are one of the few who can help them decipher what a study does and doesn't mean.

If you include nutrition in your practice, then you will want to spend some time every week

examining what the latest research has found. One source is [a blog I write](#) that features the results of a new study every Tuesday and Thursday. Each post is short and always has a link to the actual study.

Many articles on just as many websites suggest they are somehow authoritative about nutrition. If you want a clear understanding of what is accurate versus what is opinion, you need to read at least the abstract of the actual study, not the editorial - and certainly not the news item.

Staying current on the research literature will not only make you more knowledgeable, but also will give you the ability to explain the details of the latest news story and help your patients understand how often the information is in error. You will be able to calmly say (as I did to my concerned staff member), "Don't believe it."

References

1. "Multivitamin Researchers Say 'Case Is Closed' After Studies Find No Health Benefits." CBS News, Dec. 16, 2013.
 2. Guallar G, Stranges S, Mulrow C, Appel LJ, Miller III ER. "Enough Is Enough: Stop Wasting Money on Vitamin and Mineral Supplements." *Ann Intern Med*, 2013;159(12):850-851-851.
 3. "Multivitamin Use Linked to Lowered Cancer Risk." *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2012.
 4. Wassertheil-Smoller S, McGinn AP, Budrys N, et al. Multivitamin and mineral use and breast cancer mortality in older women with invasive breast cancer in the women's health initiative. *Breast Cancer Res & Treat*, October 2013;141(3):495-505.
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