

The Nutrition Reporter™

EXTRA

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Confused About the Negative Studies on Supplements? Here's an Explanation

These days, studies of nutrition and dietary supplements can be very, very confusing. One day we hear that saturated fats are bad for our health, and then new research finds that they don't have any effect at all. One week we hear that supplements can reduce our risk of heart disease and cancer, the next that they just might cause those diseases.

What's really going on? Several things, I think.

First, scientific research is rarely 100 percent consistent. That's just the nature of science, especially in the fields of biology and medicine. The reason is that there are so many potential variables, including eating habits, physical activity, stress, exposure to toxins, and genetics – as well as different methodologies in research. So if scientific research is often so messy, how can you sort through it to make informed decisions about what to eat? I think Jeffrey Blumberg, PhD, of Tufts University, Boston, probably said it best: look at the totality of the research and where it points, not just a single study that contradicts dozens or hundreds of other studies.

Second, I blame a lot of the nutrition confusion on the public relations folks who work for universities, medical centers, drug companies, and even some food and supplement companies. I'm trying (with difficulty) to reduce the hundreds of news releases I receive by email every day. So much of what they pitch to writers is nothing more than half-baked "maybe" research. Publicizing research can bring positive attention to institutions and companies, but it can also end up being little more than a deceitful tease. How many times have we heard about "potential" new cancer treatments or cures over the past 40 years? The sad truth is that there are no cures, and most conventional cancer treatments are brutal and don't enhance long-term quality of life.

Third, the barrage of news releases by public relations people is compounded by the inexperience and naiveté of journalists. At one time, the major newspapers and news organizations had dedicated

science and medical reporters. I often had my arguments with them – they often rely on medical "experts" who have drug-company relationships and little understanding of nutritional or alternative therapies. Getting quotes from them is a little like getting reliable information from the representative of a one-party political system. This situation has gotten far worse with nearly every newspaper suffering from declining circulation and staff cuts – so medical reporting now often falls to journalists who might be writing about crime or baseball one day and then be asked to write about a vitamin study. They may report the facts, but they are not likely to understand the overall context or understand what's wrong with a study.

Fourth, the more I read and listen, the more convinced I become that what a person believes in nutrition is all too often similar to a belief system – that is, a person's nutrition beliefs are a lot like a religion. Understand, please, that I am not trying to offend anyone's religious beliefs. However, you know as well as I do that most people do not usually change their religious beliefs in any substantial way. Born a Christian, Jew, or Muslim, nearly everyone will remain a Christian, Jew, or Muslim for the rest of their lives. But nutrition is *not* a religion – it's a science that teems with new and changing research all the time. For example, vegetarianism should not be approached as a religious belief – some people do very well eating a vegetarian diet, but others do not. (Tip: If you are an overweight or diabetic vegetarian, it may not be the ideal diet for you.)

Fifth, what nutrition *can* do – assuming that we approach the subject with some mental flexibility – is empower each and every one of us to achieve and maintain better health. We cannot achieve this empowerment if we decide to never change our eating habits. For example, research has clearly shown that eating a lot of vegetables or coldwater

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fish reduces the risk of serious diseases. So it only makes sense to eat more veggies and fish. Similarly, the research on the health benefits of dietary supplements is so extensive and so persuasive, it only makes sense to take, at the very least, a high-potency multivitamin, extra vitamin C, and extra vitamin D – to name just several of the beneficial supplements. The rationale for supplements, like for healthy foods, is based on studies and basic biochemistry: everything that we are, physically, is based on nutritional building blocks.

As we approach the end of 2010, I'm seeing still more negative studies on supplements – studies that are inherently flawed. For example, a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* claimed that supplements of the omega-3 fat docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) did not improve either depression in mothers or brain development in their children. I read the study and was left scratching my head because *both* DHA and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA, the other key omega-3) are needed for positive moods and brain development. Another study, in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, reported that folic acid supplements did not reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. Once again, other nutrients – particularly vitamins B6 and B12 – are needed in the same biochemical process that can lower the risk of cardiovascular disease. So why did the researchers focus only on folic acid? I haven't got a clue, although innocent naïveté or simple stupidity could be explanations. Unlike drugs, nutrients work as a team.

And as we start 2011, remember that the forces I describe (and others, such as pharmaceutical advertising) will often make us think twice about the obvious health benefits of good food and supplements. Keep the faith, friends – your health will depend on it. –Jack Challem

Two Highly Recommended Books

Nutritional Medicine, by Alan Gaby, MD (Perlberg Publishing, 2011, \$295). Dr. Gaby has a grasp of nutritional medicine that is unparalleled, and his educational workshops are the stuff of legend. Whether you're a clinician or a serious reader of nutrition books (or both), his *Nutritional Medicine* is worth the investment and will likely last a lifetime. Weighing in at several pounds and more than 1,300 pages, the book is organized like a medical textbook. It is divided in sections that cover cardiovascular diseases, gastroenterology, neurology, rheumatology, dermatology, and other disciplines. All in all, the book describes 400 different health conditions and

their nutritional therapies, individual vitamins and minerals, and the fundamentals of nutritional medicine. Although the book goes into impressive depth in describing health conditions and then covering the research on nutritional therapies (with more than 15,000 references), the writing remains clear to the average person and provides guidance to the clinician. You can order it by going to www.doctorgaby.com or by calling (603) 225-0134.

Zapped, by Ann Louise Gittleman (HarperOne, 2010, \$25.99). *Zapped* is an excellent book, but one I suspect a lot of people will prefer to not know about. It's about the electronic pollution that surrounds us and passes through our bodies 24 hours a day – including radio and television signals and microwave radiation from cell phone towers and phones next to our brain. If you use a microwave oven, a refrigerator, or sleep with your head near a cordless phone or an electric alarm clock, you're exposed to electrical patterns generated by these devices. The fact that some brain cancers are associated with heavy cell phone use should give you a sense of the health consequences. These waves are types of non-ionizing radiation that can disrupt cell activities and damage genes. You don't want to hear about this? Is ignorance bliss? I don't think so. Ann Louise, who I have known professionally for many years, explains the health hazards and how to reduce your exposure to the many forms of electronic pollution, as well as ways to boost your body's resistance to its harmful effects. You can start by using a wired headset to connect to your cell phone, pushing the digital alarm clock far from your head, and increase your distance from other sources of electronic pollution, such as your wi-fi base station. Taking some antioxidant supplements might help as well, because they can help prevent cell damage. I highly recommend this book, but you'll probably never look at your cell phone quite the same way again. –JC

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