

## Does It Have To Be Vitamins Vs Veggies?

By Jack Challem, Editor & Publisher

We too often tolerate a sanctimonious and mean-spirited streak in our society. People are punished socially for little more than being human—for being poor, ethnic, teenage and pregnant, or for a hundred other reasons. The higher moral ground, we've been told, would be to accept people with compassion and, when needed, to help improve the quality of their lives.

Strange as it might seem, a similar drama unfolds in the field of nutrition.

It is abundantly clear that vitamin-rich fruits and vegetables greatly reduce the risk of developing heart disease, cancer, and other degenerative diseases. Accordingly, dietitians urge people to eat more of these nutritious foods.

But ask a dietitian about vitamin supplements and the response will likely be as reproving as a mean-spirited minister: you should get all the vitamins and minerals you need by eating a well-balanced diet.

It's sound advice, of course. We all should eat well-balanced diets. But it doesn't reflect the reality of the 1990s.

The way we live and work frequently subverts the most sincere and ambitious plans to eat right. Home-cooked meals give way to convenient fast foods and abbreviated breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. Junk foods, carefully designed to titillate our taste buds, surround us with unnatural temptations. Some of our good intentions are even sidetracked by "bitter-taste" genes that make sweet apples taste like bad medicine. In the end, it's probably harder to give up bad eating habits than tobacco.

Nobly, the U. S. Department of Agriculture recommends that people eat 3-5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily, and the National Cancer Institute recommends 5-9 servings of fruits and vegetables daily to lower the risk of cancer.

But unless you're a devout vegetarian, eating all these servings of healthful fruits and vegetables is easier said than done.

Eight years ago, researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, reported that only 9 percent of Americans ate 3-5 servings of fruits and vegetables on a given day, and 45 percent failed to consume any at all. The same researchers recently reported that fruit and vegetable consumption has not improved and in some ways has gotten worse.

Even the most optimistic appraisal of eating habits shows Americans falling far short of dietary recommendations for fruits and vegetables. A 1995 NCI survey found that 32 percent of Americans ate 4 daily servings of fruits and vegetables.

The eating habits of children aren't any better. A small survey of students from schools on Long Island and Brooklyn, N.Y., found that 20 percent consumed no fruits or vegetables with the exception of french fries.

So the question becomes: is it fair to punish people for their nutritional sins?

It doesn't seem right.

Certainly, we should encourage people to eat more fruits and vegetables. But we have to recognize that many—perhaps most—people simply won't any time soon.

Should we therefore deny them the health benefits of vitamin supplements—a sacrament, of sorts, to partially redeem their health?

It would seem unfair to do so.

The research overwhelmingly shows that high intake of vitamins, minerals, and other micronutrients is associated with good health, and that low intake of these nutrients is related to poor health and chronic disease.

We know, thanks to cell and molecular biologists, that these nutrients are the basic building blocks that keep our body's cells functioning normally and protect our genes from disease-inducing damage.

We know, as well, that vitamin E and folic acid reduce the risk of heart disease, vitamin C and zinc relieve cold symptoms, and beta-carotene and related carotenoids lower the risk of many types of cancer.

Supplements cannot replace everything that's in fruits and vegetables. But they're far better than nothing at all. And there's no sense in self-righteously denying them to people of poor nutritional fiber.

Furthermore, vitamin supplements offer benefits that indirectly touch every one of us. One recent study, which looked at just three conditions, estimated that vitamin supplements could reduce hospitalization and health-care costs by \$20 billion. That's \$20 billion of your money and mine.

It's time we took the higher nutritional ground and encouraged people to both eat wisely and supplement sensibly. It's the rational and compassionate thing to do, and it's in everyone's best interest. □

# The Case Against Self-Treatment with DHEA

A year ago, when over-the-counter DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) gained momentum in the health food industry, a few people looked around and shook their heads. DHEA was a steroid hormone—a drug—not a natural food or vitamin. Why were vitamin companies and health food stores selling it?

Recommending or selling hormones was antithetical to everything the health food industry was built around. Some companies (e.g., Carlson and Solgar) flatly refused to sell DHEA, as did some health food stores (e.g., Denver-based Vitamin Cottage). But in an era of anti-aging promises, DHEA quickly became a big seller for many other companies and stores.

Some people have told me about their newfound sense of health and better sex lives after taking DHEA. But I couldn't help but think: reducing sugar and fat intake, going for a daily walk, and taking some vitamins might have done the same, though they would have taken more effort than swallowing a single hormone pill.

As a journalist-analyst, I looked at the science behind DHEA as an anti-aging drug and was left wanting. There were a few promising short-term studies on people, but DHEA was still a drug that basically gave a kick in the pants to people who hadn't bothered to care of themselves, or it was a legal steroid for young body builders.

There was also ample evidence that estrogen therapy increased the risk of endometrial and breast cancers in women, and that testosterone increased the risk of prostate cancers in men. DHEA boosts levels of both estrogen and testosterone and would increase the risk of these cancers.

Even though I'm not an attorney, I couldn't help but see the product liability issues—issues that no one else seemed to be addressing. Vitamin supplements have an extraordinary record of safe use, which has allowed the health food industry to let down its guard. Hormones just don't have that safety record.

When I raised these issues with the health magazines I write for, most didn't want to hear about them. With few exceptions, the magazines have published only the good, and often inflated, news about DHEA and other over-the-counter hormones to help promote them. They didn't want to offend advertisers and slow down sales.

As a consequence, retailers heard little about the potential hazards of DHEA. And that brings us to the issue of informed consent. How could retailers inform their customers about the risks of DHEA if they didn't know about them?

All of this became more tangible when I attended a focus group of health food shoppers. In the group were two bright women who heard exciting things about DHEA and started taking it—but they had no idea what it

was. That, quite simply, was dumb and dangerous.

I predicted that the DHEA house of cards would eventually come crashing down with one good lawsuit—valid or not—from a consumer who had a very bad reaction to DHEA. It would be the excuse the FDA would need to demonstrate harm and to seize products.

Well, the lawsuit hasn't been filed yet. But it may not be far away.

On Sept. 12, I got a call from an uncharacteristically subdued Ray Sahelian, MD. Sahelian is the author of *DHEA: A Practical Guide* (Avery, 1996). He has no financial ties to any supplement company, but he has been an aggressive promoter of OTC hormones, including DHEA, melatonin, and pregnenolone.

Sahelian told me that over recent months, his office had received numerous phone calls from people who had serious reactions to high doses of DHEA. A 40-year-old man taking 50 mg of DHEA was hospitalized with atrial fibrillation, a type of arrhythmia. A 50-year-old woman felt heart palpitations. A physician developed heart irregularities. One caller reported that an 80-year-old woman took DHEA, suddenly felt weak, and died of a heart attack two days later.

No researcher or clinician had previously reported heart irregularities associated with DHEA.

I asked Sahelian how he felt about all this. It made him nervous, of course. He said that, in his book, he recommended no more than 5-10 mg of DHEA daily without a physician's guidance. But the reality is most people really don't talk to their physicians about supplements, and many believe that if a little is good, more must be better.

Through all this, the issue of product liability looms closer than ever before. DHEA may be a wonder drug, if you believe the lopsided articles on it, but it's still a drug. And drugs, by their very nature, are fraught with more risks than natural vitamins and herbs.

—Jack Challem

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