

# Study: Vitamins No Magic Bullet for Heart Health

## Antioxidant Supplements Do Little to Help Prevent Heart Disease

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Contrary to popular belief, taking antioxidant vitamins may do little to protect your heart.

A study released today in the Archives of Internal Medicine is the latest to put a dent in the theory that vitamins such as C, E and antioxidants such as beta carotene can reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular events.

Although previous research has come to similar conclusions, the study at hand is perhaps one of the largest to debunk the idea that these vitamins can lead to a healthier heart.

The research involved 8,000 women at high risk for heart disease who were assigned to take either vitamins alone or in combination or a placebo over nine years.

Study author Nancy R. Cook, a researcher at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, notes that these results "add to the body of evidence that antioxidants do not add to the prevention of heart disease."

She adds that when the study first began in 1996, "we were expecting to find that these substances had a beneficial effect."

Cook's team was not alone in its hopes. Previous research found that diets high in fruits and vegetables -- and in turn antioxidants -- were associated with decreased heart problems.

However, further studies have not been able to show any proven benefits when looking at dietary supplements.

"Although theoretically these antioxidants would appear to be protective & these antioxidant vitamins have not lived up to their promises," says Dr. Carl Lavie, director of cardiac rehabilitation and prevention at Ochsner Medical Center.

The research could be disappointing to many who may have hoped that dietary supplements would represent a "magic bullet" for heart ills.

"Studies of nutrients for disease prevention all indicate that the active ingredient in a healthful diet is a healthful diet, and not some isolated nutrient we can put in a pill," says Dr. David Katz, director of the prevention research center at Yale University.

Dr. Susan Bennett, director of the Women's Heart Program at George Washington University, agrees. "People are always getting keyed into something that is easy to do. People think taking a pill is easier than quitting smoking, exercising or eating well."

Bennett says the current research reaffirms that taking a pill cannot replace lifestyle modification -- a weighty finding, considering that approximately 10 percent to 20 percent of people in the United States routinely take over-the-counter dietary supplements.

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If taking vitamins is not the answer, many people are wondering what they can do to protect themselves from heart disease. Cardiologists and dietitians across the country are saying that diet and exercise are key.

"Supplements don't work alone; they need a solid foundation of healthy diet and exercise," says Dawn Blatner, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

When asked what she recommends to her patients, Dr. Sharonne Hayes, director of the Women's Heart Clinic at the Mayo Clinic, says she "preaches dietary changes," recommending a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and a Mediterranean-style diet high in monounsaturated fats, such as those found in olive oil and fish.

But why would these foods, high in antioxidants, work when supplements containing such antioxidants do not?

Bennett suggests that the form of vitamin E found in fruits and vegetables, which are thought to be beneficial may be different from what is provided in the supplement.

"When you use food to get your vitamins you are inherently eating healthy," she says.

And nutrition and exercise experts say that despite this study, those who take supplements may still be enjoying some health benefits.

For example, Dr. Jana Klauer, a specialist in nutrition and exercise, recommends "eating fish and taking fish oil capsules for protection of heart and mind."

Fish oil is high in omega-3 fatty acids, she says, which are relatively sparse in the typical American diet. It has been shown to lower triglyceride levels and offer some protection from heart disease.

Women in particular should also take calcium supplements to protect them from the bone disease osteoporosis. Blatner says most women "fall quite short on calcium and vitamin D" in their diets.

As for heart disease, physicians say aerobic exercise, such as walking or biking, may be the best bet for a healthier heart alongside a healthy diet. The American Heart Association currently recommends 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise five times a week.

In the meantime, Hayes says that the medical community will continue to look for a shortcut to help prevent heart disease.

But until then, it may be a good idea to rein in the temptation to shell out for dietary supplements in the name of heart health.

"They can be putting the money to much better uses, such as joining a gym or purchasing healthy food," Bennett says.

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