

Too many vitamins can endanger health, says USDA nutritionist

Too much of many vitamins and minerals can prove as harmful to human health as too little, a U.S. Department of Agriculture nutritionist said today.

"Your body needs only so much of each nutrient—sometimes only a trace," said Helene N. Guttman, a nutritionist with USDA's Agricultural Research Service. Guttman is associate director of USDA's Human Nutrition Research Center at Beltsville, Md.

"Overdoses of certain vitamins, like A and D, can make you seriously ill, and large doses of Vitamin E over long periods can produce flu-like symptoms. Many other vitamins and minerals have to be ingested in proper balance with one another."

"Too many Americans believe that if one of something is good, then two or three must be better. That is definitely not the case with vitamins and minerals," she said. "Buying too many vitamin supplements can also be hard on the pocketbook."

The initials "RDA" on food boxes and vitamin bottles stand for "Recommended Dietary Allowance."

"They mean what they say," Guttman said. "Once you have 100 percent of what you need and you self-prescribe with many times more of a nutrient, you force your metabolism to work overtime to rebalance. Some people are successful in this rebalancing act; others are not."

Guttman said an elderly neighbor was suffering from memory lapses while taking large supplements of several so-called "anti-stress" vitamins.

"She feared becoming senile," she said, "but when she cut back on the vitamins to no more than the RDA for each, her memory improved in a few days. She is an example of a person whose metabolism could not rebalance when confronted with excessive trace nutrients."

According to James C. Smith, Jr.,

who works with Guttman, vitamins and minerals that must be ingested in proper balance are iron, zinc and copper. Smith is chief of USDA's Vitamin and Minerals Nutrition Laboratory.

"Recent research," Smith said, "leaves no doubt that pregnant women and lactating mothers require supplements of iron and zinc. But we find too much iron inhibits the body's absorption of zinc, and too much zinc, in turn, can antagonize the body's copper."

Potassium and sodium also have to be kept in balance, Smith said. Many adult Americans are apt to get more sodium than they need and less potassium.

"USDA researchers recently found during a one-year study that blood pressure in men was lowest when their potassium intake was highest," he said.

Guttman said self-administered overdosing with folic acid, another supplement available at the vitamin counter, can also cause problems.

"If you take huge doses of folic acid to cure a vitamin B12-associated anemia, you can cause real trouble for yourself," said Guttman.

"There are several types of vitamin-deficiency anemias," she said.

"Some are caused by an insufficient amount of vitamin B12 and others by insufficient folic acid. The folic acid

mobilizes the vitamin B12 present in the liver and gives a temporary remission of symptoms, so that you don't notice your mistake right away.

"But then the liver runs out of vitamin B12 to contribute, and there is a terrible relapse. Even worse, vitamin B12 is scavenged from the nervous system and you can end up with something worse—vitamin B12-deficiency problem of the nervous system called combined system disease."

She said the surest way to a nutritionally adequate diet for most adults is to eat balanced diets containing a variety of food.

"It's good to be an adventurous diner," she said. "That way you won't get bored and meals become—and remain—a pleasant experience."

"The Chinese philosopher who advised, 'all things, but in moderation,' was on the right track when it comes to good nutrition. When you get your nutrients from a wide variety of foods instead of pills, you not only get the vitamins and minerals we know about; you also get all those good things that haven't been discovered yet. Pills should be reserved for supplementation when needed."

Smith said research on the functions of many minerals in human

nutrition is far from complete.

He said recent studies show chromium may alleviate symptoms of both hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia—too much sugar in the blood and too little. USDA scientists at Beltsville, Md., have found that most people have a marginal intake of chromium.

"Rather than taking pills, what can you eat that is high in chromium?" "Cereal products, nuts and mushrooms," said Smith. "Black pepper and brewer's yeast are also relatively high in chromium, but the usual diet contains little of these. There may be special cases where measured supplements of specific minerals, such as chromium, are necessary."

Smith said USDA scientists recently found the increased popularity of running and other forms of strenuous exercise may increase dietary needs for chromium and zinc.

"There is an increased excretion of those two minerals among people who exercise regularly and hard," he said.

Guttman, Smith and their USDA colleagues study ways to define human requirements for essential nutrients and the metabolic role of nutrients, alone and in combination with other substances.

Engagements



Green — Florea

Mr. and Mrs. Harry L. Green are proud to announce the engagement of their daughter Ella Mae Green to David Jean Florea, son of Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Baird and Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Florea. A December wedding is planned.

November 22:
Remembering JFK



November 22nd will mark the 21st anniversary of the death of one of our most remarkable presidents—John F. Kennedy. Among those who have felt his loss most keenly over the years is a group of some of our most dedicated workers—public employees.

President Kennedy did what too few Presidents had done before him and too few have done since, they feel: he honored public employees. In his first State of the Union message he said, "Let the public service be a proud and lively career. And let every man and woman who works in any area of our national government, in any branch, at any level, be able to say with pride and honor in future years: I served the United States Government in that hour of our nation's need."

The young President often stressed that the quality of government is directly tied to the capabilities and dedication of those who serve our nation. He believed that "a career government service is one of the foundations of democracy. It must be strong, it must have prestige, there must be sufficient remuneration to make it worthwhile." In the problems he faced, from racial unrest to the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy looked not only to policy choices for solutions, but to the people entrusted with carrying out the nation's will. He matched his praise for the civil service with deeds, including the landmark Federal Pay Reform Act of 1962.

Morale in today's civil service is far from as high as it was in the Kennedy era. The consequences of "beating up on the bureaucracy" have been grave. According to the Public Employees Roundtable, a non-profit educational group, many top federal employees leave government for jobs with higher pay and better benefits.

In spite of these trends—and perhaps because of them—the anniversary of President Kennedy's death takes on special meaning for public servants. He spoke of an American ideal of service to one's country that still nurtures millions of government workers. As Kennedy once said, "We need to draw upon America's entire reservoir of talent and skill to help conduct our generation's most important business—the public business."

This information is provided by The Public Employees Roundtable, a group concerned with the quality of government service, with the support of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Federal Employee Program. For information: PER, P.O. Box 7610, Wash., D.C. 20044.

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