Council for Responsible Nutrition
1828 L Street, NW, Suite 900 • Washington, DC 20036-5114
(202) 776-7929 • fax (202) 204-7980 • www.crnusa.org

Q&A

Questions and Answers about Vitamin E

Like many people, you may have questions about some of the recent stories that have been in the news about vitamin E. Here is some useful advice to help you better understand the safety and benefits of vitamin E.

Q. I've seen some confusing news in the paper about vitamin E. Although I've taken vitamin E daily for almost 10 years, I now wonder about its safety. Is this vitamin safe?

A. Yes. Vitamin E is very safe. Like all vitamins, it is by definition essential for life. Your body needs it to protect against damage caused by free radicals, oxidized substances that can be associated with heart disease and cancer. In addition, many studies have shown that vitamin E boosts the immune system, reduces the risk of developing various vision disorders including cataracts or macular degeneration, and improves brain function –enhancing short term memory while reducing the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.

Q. An article I read suggested that vitamin E may be harmful. What is that all about?

A. Some researchers from Johns Hopkins University conducted a meta-analysis (*see related fact sheet*) of 19 studies conducted with patient groups, many of whom were elderly, and taking multiple prescription medications because they already had chronic diseases including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, kidney failure or heart disease. The researchers interpreted their data to suggest that high doses of vitamin E may be associated with a slight increased risk of death. Many of the nation's leading antioxidant experts reviewed the study and said they were not convinced of an increased risk and in fact noted that vitamin E is safe within a wide range of intakes.

Q. Can I get all the needed vitamin E through diet?

A. Most people do not get the Recommended Dietary Allowance of vitamin E (15 mg) from their diet alone. That's why so many of us need to take a supplement to ensure adequate intake. You can get more vitamin E into your diet by consuming such foods as nuts, green leafy vegetables and fortified cereals. You can also get vitamin E from a multivitamin or a single vitamin E supplement.

Q. Is it safe to take more vitamin E than what I can get in a multivitamin?

A. Yes, and for many people high doses of vitamin E is beneficial. The Institute of Medicine, a scientific advisory body, has set an Upper Level (a dose at which there is no known harm) for vitamin E at 1000 mg (1000 IU or synthetic vitamin E, or 1500 IU natural vitamin E).

Q. What is the common dose of vitamin E?

A. The most commonly marketed dose of single-nutrient vitamin E in the U.S. is 400 IU.

Continued

More questions and answers about vitamin E

Q. What is the link between vitamin E and the protection of my eyesight?

A. A number of studies spotlight the association between vitamin E and reduced risk of cataracts (a major cause of blindness throughout the world) and macular degeneration (the number one cause of vision impairment in the United States). In one study of people taking a multivitamin or a supplement of C or E for a decade, results showed a 60% lower incidence of cataracts among the group taking a supplement. Other studies of people taking vitamins E, C and zinc demonstrated they were better protected from advanced macular degeneration than those individuals who didn't take them.

Q. Does vitamin E offer protection against developing Alzheimer's disease?

A. There is evidence to suggest that medications or vitamins (such as vitamin E) that increase the levels of catecholamines, certain chemicals in the brain, can protect the neurons from damage that could otherwise lead to Alzheimer's disease. In addition, according to a wide range of other studies, antioxidants like vitamin E can improve brain function, short-term memory, problem-solving and general reasoning skills.

Q. Does vitamin E help protect against cancer?

A. Studies have linked reduced rates of cancers of the prostate, breast, and bladder with higher intakes of vitamin E. It is believed that antioxidants such as vitamin E reduce the risk because they help protect cell membranes from free radicals – a byproduct of cellular metabolism. They bind free radicals before they can do damage to the cell.

Q. Does vitamin E help protect against heart disease?

A. A large body of experimental study and some clinical research studies have indicated a link between intake of the antioxidant vitamin E and a reduced risk of heart disease. In addition, several ongoing trials are being conducted between vitamin E and the risk of heart disease.

Q. Is it important to continue studying the effects of vitamin E?

A. Absolutely. Many studies underway around the world will add to our knowledge over the coming years, so that we can optimize the level and formulation of vitamin E for various age groups and for people with inherited risk factors for a wide range of diseases.