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# More doubts about multivitamins

Philip Wilson, patient editor, BMJ Group 12 February 09

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When an idea becomes popular, it can take on a life of its own, regardless of whether it's true or not. The biologist Richard Dawkins described these ideas as "memes," comparing their spread with the way genes reproduce in living things.

There's no shortage of medical memes. I blogged [earlier in the year](#) about health myths, like sugar making children hyperactive (it doesn't) or the risk of putting on weight if you eat late at night (you don't, at least as long as you're not eating more overall).

The idea that you need extra vitamins from pills is so widespread that around half of Americans take some kind of supplement. Vitamins are vital for health; there's no doubt about that. Thanks to better nutrition, diseases caused by vitamin deficiencies are rare in the United States. And everybody knows that a healthy diet is rich in fruit, vegetables and other sources of vitamins. So, it makes sense that extra vitamins must be a good thing?

Unfortunately, more and more research is suggesting that, if you're healthy and have an adequate diet, vitamin supplements won't do much, apart from adding a few dollars to your weekly grocery bill.

My colleague, Sophie Ramsey, wrote [last week](#) about how most children who take vitamin pills don't really need them (and sadly, that the children who could benefit don't get them). Now, a [new study](#) has looked at over 160,000 postmenopausal women, all across the country, and found that multivitamins didn't prevent major diseases or help the women live longer.

The average woman in the study was in her early 60s, and the researchers kept in touch for around eight years. Just over 4 in 10 women chose to take a multivitamin. However, doing so didn't make any difference to their chances of getting cancer, having a heart attack or stroke, or dying during the study.

Given the lack of evidence, why do so many people take vitamin supplements? The researchers think it's a case of mixed messages. Supplements are useful for some specific groups, and for people who

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can't get enough vitamins from their diet. For example, vegans often struggle to get enough vitamin B12, and some medical conditions affect how well you absorb vitamins from food. Vitamin D and folic acid are both useful for pregnant women.

The fact that supplements are important for particular groups may have misled people into thinking there are advantages for everyone. But, assuming you're in good health and eating a reasonable diet, it's far from certain that vitamin pills will do you any good.

If you're looking for something to improve your health, eating a balanced diet is better than trying to make up for a poor diet with pills.

## What you need to know

For healthy people with a reasonable diet, it's not clear whether multivitamins have any important health benefits. Some groups of people can benefit from vitamins, so talk to your doctor if you think there's a reason why you think they might be useful for you.