

Pathways to Healing

by Elaine Zablocki

Vitamins and Supplements: Useful Tools



Melinda Bower, ND

Recently we've seen quite a few articles in the mainstream press saying that vitamins and supplements have been overrated. In December, the *Annals of Internal Medicine* published results from three studies, together with an editorial titled "Enough is Enough; Stop Wasting Money on Vitamin and Mineral Supplements." The *New*

York Times opinion pages ran a column headlined "Don't Take Your Vitamins." In February the US Preventative Services Task Force reported on multivitamins, but didn't take a position for or against them.

When we look at these studies, we need to think about two different issues, says Melinda Bower, ND, a clinical resident at the Bastyr Center for Natural Health. "Do you have a nutrient deficiency, or are you a normal healthy person? I see patients who choose to be vegan or vegetarian, and they may actually have a nutrient deficiency, and therefore a vitamin does help them feel better. Or patients may have an absorption issue with leaky gut syndrome or other GI issues. They are not absorbing the right nutrients from their food, and they will feel much better with a multivitamin." Bower sees patients and teaches naturopathic students at Bastyr's teaching clinic, and she also has a private practice.

Vitamins Aren't All the Same

Bower notes that another important issue to consider when looking at supplements is the quality of each particular item. If you're considering calcium, for example, you need to ask what form of calcium is in the pill, how much can actually be absorbed, and what other nutrients are combined with it. "The government doesn't require testing of supplements, but here at Bastyr we require the products we carry to be tested for identity, quantity and contaminants," Bower says. "We need to be 100% sure whether each supplement is a good product to recommend to our patients."

One useful resource for reliable information on vitamins and supplements is Consumer Lab, which purchases supplements on the open market, submits them to third-party laboratories for testing, and publishes the results. "For example, the Consumer Lab report for vitamin D summarizes all the studies that have been done on it, offering so much valuable information," Bower says. "Basically, we want to look at an analysis from an independent organization that's not affiliated with the company that manufactures the product."

Food is the Best Medicine

It's best to get the nutrients that we need from our food. Bower likes to quote Hippocrates, who said, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." She adds, "Whenever I can figure out a way to encourage my patients to eat balanced meals and get everything they need from food, I am certainly going to do that."

"At the same time, if you look at USDA's food composition data, based on surveys over the last hundred years, you see a decline in nutrient density over time," she adds. "There are many possible reasons as to why that is, but it is more difficult today to get everything we need from our food."

Each patient is unique, and helping them make needed lifestyle changes requires a combination of persistence, positive energy, and emotional sensitivity. Sometimes it can be difficult to help patients start eating a more healthful diet. "Quite a few people just want a magic pill that will help them feel better, without so much work," Bowers says. "Unfortunately, I don't have the magic pill."

When Bower first meets a patient, she does a thorough history, covering diet, exercise, stress, and family situation. "I always ask, what are your goals, and what are you willing to do to get that place?" she says. She talks with each patient about how much they feel able to do. *Can you do exercise 30 minutes a day? If not every day, then how about five days a week? or most days of the week?*

"With each patient, we come up with an agreement about what they are willing to do at this time," Bower says. "Some of my patients have designed specific rewards for themselves. If they follow their plan for a whole week, then they get to do a special activity they enjoy, such as a movie or a massage."

Tools for a Healthier Future

Figuring out which vitamins will probably help a particular patient depends on a careful history, an analysis of their current eating patterns, and a diagnosis of their current condition. Bower believes in individualized treatment for each patient. She may start out with lab tests to pinpoint their current status, before making changes.

For example, there's been a great deal of discussion recently about possible benefits of vitamin D, but there's also controversy on this subject. "I usually test vitamin D levels first, because I want to know how low someone may be – that helps to guide me," she says. In fact, practicing in Seattle (which is often cloudy), she rarely sees patients who have good vitamin D levels without any supplements. But it's a good idea to test the levels, offer the patient a supplement for three months, and then retest them. "If their blood levels are still low, that tells me I may need to increase the dosage."

She finds that many of her patients benefit from probiotics. "There is a great deal of research on how important probiotics are in helping to deal with conditions like ulcerative colitis. To be honest, probiotics are one of those things that benefits almost everybody."

Bower uses probiotic supplements such as HLC Intensive and HMF Super Power from Seroyal. "They have many different strains of bacteria, billions of organisms per dose. It's a lot more than you can get from eating yogurt. These supplements are really

important in keeping good bacteria in the gut, and we're learning so much about how that affects our whole immune system."

Fish oil with omega-3s is another supplement that Bower finds useful for many of her patients. "There are so many ways EPA and DHA affect brain health, memory, and our cardiovascular health. This is another one of those products that affects many different systems. However, it is really important to use a product that has been third-party tested, because the potential for it to have mercury or other metals in it is so high."

The essence of naturopathic practice is to take the time to tune in to each patient's specific circumstances, and this means that treatment for a condition may vary from patient to patient. "For me the most exciting thing about being a naturopathic doctor is that I could see four patients with eczema and treat them all differently based on their particular situation," Bowers says. "I am not going to just give all of them a steroid cream. They are each individuals. The underlying cause of the eczema may vary, their biochemistry is different, and the way they react to certain things will be different. That's why their treatments will be completely individualized."

In this light, the flurry of headlines saying "Stop Taking Vitamins" seems to miss the point. Each person may or may not benefit from specific vitamins and supplements, depending on their health, their diet, and many other factors. Bower's role is to listen attentively to her patients, to observe their physical and emotional condition, and then use her expertise to suggest appropriate tools for a healthier future.

Resources

Consumer Lab: <http://www.consumerlab.com>

Bastyr University: <http://www.bastyr.edu>

Bastyr Center for Natural Health: <http://www.bastyrcenter.org>

Elaine Zablocki has been a freelance health-care journalist for more than 20 years. She was the editor of *Alternative Medicine Business News* and *CHRF News Files*. She writes regularly for many health-care publications.

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