

Clinical Update

Vitamin D Supplements May Lengthen Life

They could fight cancer and heart disease, researchers say

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Vitamin D supplements could prolong your life, a new European study suggests. "The intake of usual doses of vitamin D seems to decrease mortality from any cause of death," said lead researcher Dr. Philippe Autier, from the International Agency for Research on Cancer in Lyon, France.

The new finding, published in the Sept. 10 issue of the Archives of Internal Medicine, is a bit of an anomaly, because the benefits of vitamin supplements remains uncertain at best. While they are often touted as a means of reducing risks for cancer and heart disease, some studies have found supplements have no effect on these conditions.

For example, other studies have shown that vitamin E has no effect on cancer, Autier said. And prior research suggests that multivitamin supplements do nothing to reduce cancer risk, he added. But vitamin D may be the exception, according to the results of this new study.

"This is the first study that shows that taking one vitamin has an impact on mortality," Autier said. "If you want to increase your vitamin D intake by taking supplements, it looks like a great idea."

In the study, Autier, and his colleague Sara Gandini, from the European Institute of Oncology in Milan, Italy, looked at data from 18 trials involving more than 57,000 people. Doses of vitamin D in the trials varied from 300 to 2,000 international units (IUs), with an average dose of 528 IUs.

Over a follow-up of almost 6 years, 4,777 of the people in the studies died. Those who took vitamin D supplements had a 7 percent lower risk of death compared with those who didn't take the supplement, Autier and Gandini found.

Nine of the trials had collected blood samples. Those subjects who took the supplements had a 1.4- to 5.2-fold higher level of vitamin D in their blood compared to those who did not, the researchers note.

This finding could lead to new drugs to fight cancer and other diseases, Autier said. "Vitamin D can reduce the proliferation of cells; the proliferation of cells is something you see in cancer," he said.

Autier believes people should take vitamin D supplements in the range of between 400 and 600 IUs daily. "There is no need to take more -- that's crazy," he said. "You have to be careful not to take a dose that's too high," he added.

And there's another way to make sure you get vitamin D, which is important to the uptake of calcium needed for healthy bones. That's to get a moderate amount of sun exposure each day, since the skin uses sunlight to produce its own vitamin D.