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NNC CRITICAL OF MEGAVITAMIN THERAPY

The National Nutrition Consortium is concerned about people who take large amounts of vitamins. This practice seems to be based on a sincere interest in nutrition and health but, ironically, it is not a wise practice in terms of either nutrition or health.

The body does indeed need vitamins. Nutritionists have determined on the basis of research the amounts of each vitamin that meets the needs of most healthy persons. The amounts are called Recommended Dietary Allowances or RDA's; these values are quite similar to the U. S. Recommended Dietary Allowances or U.S. RDA's that are used on the labels of food containers.

The Consortium's concern arises because some people seem to think that if a small amount of a vitamin is good for you, then a large amount must be even better. THIS ASSUMPTION IS FALSE. There are important reasons why large amounts of vitamins should not be taken.

The strongest reason is that large doses of certain vitamins, particularly vitamins A and D, are known to be dangerous. Extremely large amounts may cause headaches, blurred vision, damage to the nervous system, and other bad effects. Amounts too small to cause noticeable harm but still well in excess of the RDA may interfere with the normal body processes such as nerve transmission, body protein formation, hormone action, or blood circulation. These changes are perhaps even of greater concern because they generally occur without their hazards being observed by the person, much less corrected by a doctor.

Large doses of vitamins cause problems in several different ways. Sometimes, a large dosage of one vitamin blocks the body's ability to use another vitamin. For example, large amounts of vitamin B₆ (pyridoxine) interfere with normal processes that use vitamin B₂ (riboflavin); megadoses of vitamin C may interfere with vitamin B₁₂.

Another explanation for the danger is that some vitamins, taken in large amounts, act on the body in ways quite similar to drugs. In fact, under certain circumstances, doctors prescribe particular vitamins for non-nutritional disorders. Doctors are well aware, however, that drugs often have bad side effects, especially when they are mis-used. Most people realize this is true in terms of drugs such as aspirin, but they forget (or simply do not know) that it is also true of vitamins, when taken in drug-dosage amounts.

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There are several other less dramatic reasons for not taking large doses of vitamins. The most practical reason is that it is a waste of money. Vitamins in excess of the body's need provide no benefits. The water-soluble ones (vitamin C and all of the B vitamins) simply pass from your mouth, to the intestines, to the blood, to the kidney, and then out of the body dissolved in urine. Although the fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, and K) may be stored in tissues, this is considered to be a hazard due to the risk of their accumulated toxic effects and not to be a beneficial result of taking vitamins.

The most subtle hazard of vitamin pills is that they can give a person a false sense of security about their nutritional health. A person who takes vitamins may think mistakenly that his or her nutritional needs have been cared for and that there is no need to plan appropriate food choices. AGAIN, THIS ASSUMPTION IS FALSE. Nutritionists continue, even within the last decade, to discover components of food such as vitamins and minerals that are essential to health.

Selection of a variety of types of foods -- cereals, vegetables, meat, dairy products, fruits, beans -- in amounts that provide enough (but not too much) calories of energy continues to be the soundest path to optimal nutrition, part of the foundation for health.

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