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Welcome to the first issue of Natural Health Review for 2012.

There is enormous interest in vitamin D at the moment, which seems to be involved in preventing and treating all sorts of conditions. Because of this we have included 2 studies of vitamin D this month, one in patients with documented deficiency (where it had survival benefits) and the other in women with menstrual cramps. Based on the body of evidence now available for vitamin D, I think a good case can be made for everyone to take a supplement. Other interesting findings presented in this issue include ... omega-3 reduces anxiety in students, breathing exercises help heartburn, retinol supplements may protect against melanoma, and multivitamins assist short term memory recall.

We hope you enjoy this issue of Natural Health Research Review, and welcome your feedback.

Kind Regards,

Prof Shaun Holt

shaun@naturalhealthreview.org

Vitamin D deficiency, supplementation, and patient outcomes

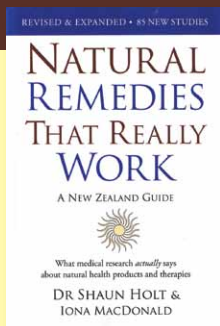
The facts:

- Almost 11,000 men and women had vitamin D levels measured over a 5-year period to evaluate the associations between vitamin D deficiency, vitamin D supplementation, and patient outcomes.
- 30% of patients were found to be in the normal vitamin D range and 70% were vitamin D deficient.
- Vitamin D deficiency was linked to cardiovascular disease and diabetes and was a strong predictor of all-cause death, whereas vitamin D supplementation was associated with better survival, particularly in patients with documented deficiency.

Prof Shaun Holt:

There is, with good reason, enormous interest in vitamin D at the moment, which seems to be important in preventing and treating all sorts of conditions. This enormous study of nearly 11,000 people showed that 70% of people are deficient in vitamin D. In addition, those who were deficient were more likely to have several conditions including hypertension, coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathy, and diabetes. But most importantly, as has been shown in other studies, vitamin D deficiency was a strong independent predictor of dying earlier. I think a good case can be made for everyone to take a vitamin D supplement, and certainly people with a known deficiency.

[http://www.ajconline.org/article/S0002-9149\(11\)02933-X/abstract](http://www.ajconline.org/article/S0002-9149(11)02933-X/abstract)



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Vitamin D can help menstrual cramps

The facts:

- Women with a history of severe menstrual cramps reported significantly less pain when they took an ultra-high dose of vitamin D (300,000 IU) five days before their next expected period.
- Fifteen of the 20 women taking vitamin D reported pain scores at least two points lower (on a 10-point scale) than they had reported during previous painful cycles.
- None of the women who took vitamin D needed to use NSAID painkillers during the trial, compared with 8 women in the placebo group.

Prof Shaun Holt:

This small study found another potentially important use of vitamin D - women with a history of severe menstrual cramps reported significantly less pain when they took an ultra-high dose of vitamin D five days before their next expected period. The results make sense as we know that vitamin D has anti-inflammatory activity, but before vitamin D can be recommended for this reason specifically, we need bigger studies and ideally we would have benefits without having to use massive doses.

<http://archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/extract/172/4/366>

Fish oils reduce exam anxiety

The facts:

- 68 healthy medical students took an omega-3 supplement (equivalent to 4-5 servings of salmon) or placebo daily for 12 weeks to see if fish oils had any effect on anxiety.
- Researchers gave the students psychological surveys to gauge stress, anxiety and depression during low-stress periods and before exams.
- Students who received the fish oil supplements had significantly lower anxiety levels than students who took a placebo, but depressive symptoms were not affected.



Prof Shaun Holt:

I can still remember how stressful medical school exams were ... and I wish that I knew that omega-3 fish oil supplements may have helped. The effectiveness of omega-3 for depression is well documented, in both population studies and high standard clinical trials. Study author Robert K. McNamara, an associate professor of psychiatry, called the study exciting and said it builds on a body of work that shows connections between omega-3 levels and psychiatric problems. He is currently working on a book about the supplement and makes the intriguing comment: "If you knew what I knew, you'd definitely be taking supplements, and supplementing your children and your dog", adding that there are no known downsides to taking omega-3 supplements as long as they're taken at normal doses.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21784145>

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Breathing exercises improve heartburn

The facts:

- Patients with mild gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) participated in an active breathing training programme for up to 9 months to determine the effects of breathing exercises on their symptoms.
- Daily breathing exercises reduced the amount of acid reaching the oesophagus, reduced antacid requirements and improved heartburn symptoms after 1 month. Benefits were maintained long term in patients who continued with breathing exercises but patients who stopped the training had no long-term benefits.
- It is possible that deep abdominal breathing might help reduce symptoms associated with GERD by strengthening the surrounding muscles of the diaphragm.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Most readers of this review would be in favour of avoiding the use of prescription drugs wherever possible, but for a condition such as gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, is there a drug-free alternative? This small study suggests that there could be. Abdominal breathing exercises, initially taught by a physical therapist, performed daily for 30 minutes led to around a 3/4 reduction in the amount of tablets needed each week, but only with those who persevered with the exercises ... unfortunately quite a few stopped as they found it too much effort or did not have the time.

<http://tinyurl.com/7rsk4gx>

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Selenium and human health

The facts:

- A new review of evidence has found that higher-than-normal levels of selenium may contribute to the development of type 2 diabetes, hair loss and certain cancers.
- However, low selenium levels have been associated with poorer coordination, increased incidence of Parkinson's disease and increased risk of dementia in older adults, as well as higher risk of mortality, poorer immune function and cognitive decline.
- People with low selenium levels may derive benefit from additional selenium, but those with adequate-to-high levels might be affected adversely by additional selenium and should not take supplements.

Prof Shaun Holt:

I get a lot of emails about selenium and some people are fervent believers in its health-promoting properties. This new paper from a professor of nutritional medicine at the University of Surrey, in England, concluded the old adage that there can be too much of a good thing and although a little may be good for health, a lot can be harmful. She neatly summarised the findings as follows: "There is a U-shaped relationship between selenium intake and health. As selenium intake goes up from a low value, health improves until the bottom of the U-shaped curve is reached, but then adverse – or even toxic – effects begin to be seen" she said. The findings do not alter my general advice, which is that, unless you have a perfect diet, taking a daily multivitamin provides "nutritional insurance" and will make sure that you are not missing out on important nutrients such as selenium.

<http://tinyurl.com/7danmha>

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Soy foods for cholesterol reduction?



The facts:

- 85 individuals ate 30–52g of soy-based foods such as tofu burgers or hot dogs every day for 4 weeks to determine the effects of soy on cholesterol levels in people who can convert soy to the estrogen-like compound equol and those who can't.
- Before they started eating the soy, both equol and non-equol producers had LDL cholesterol levels in the range that would be considered harmful according to the American Heart Association.
- A diet high in soy isoflavones lowered LDL cholesterol about equally in people who were considered "equol producers" and in those who weren't, and may therefore benefit a wider range of people than previously thought.

Prof Shaun Holt:

Both good and bad news from this study. The good news is that incorporating soy into your diet is likely to reduce the levels of so-called "bad" cholesterol, or LDL. Even better, it was previously thought that this only occurred in some people, those who are able to convert it to an estrogen-like compound called equol (not everyone does this). This new study, however, looking at results from previous studies, found that soy will actually reduce LDL cholesterol in most people, not just those who can convert to equol. However the bad news: you need quite a lot of soy on a regular basis to do this, it has to be incorporated widely into your diet, and just sprinkling a bit of soy on unhealthy food will not help your cholesterol levels.

<http://www.ajcn.org/content/95/3/564.short>

Multivitamins may improve short-term memory

The facts:

- Researchers pooled the results of 10 well-designed trials involving over 3000 patients to look at the effects of oral multivitamins on mental function.
- Compared with placebo, multivitamins were found to improve immediate free recall memory but not delayed free recall memory or verbal fluency.
- Other cognitive functions often affected in patients with Alzheimer's disease were not studied sufficiently to draw any firm conclusions.

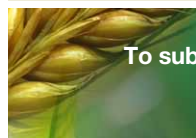
Prof Shaun Holt:

Meta-analysis, where the results of a number of studies are pooled together to get a better picture, is considered to be one of the highest forms of medical research evidence. And that is why the results from this paper deserve a lot of attention. The conclusion from combining 10 studies was that taking a daily multivitamin may well improve immediate recall memory. The researchers also commented that "the potential effects of multivitamin supplementation on markers of Alzheimer's Disease could not be determined from the data, as this was under researched" and it would be very useful if this area was studied in detail as well.

<http://iospress.metapress.com/content/376k6462v16w31v7/>

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Feldenkrais method balance classes improve mobility

The facts:

- The impact of Feldenkrais Method balance classes were evaluated in a group of 26 community-dwelling older adults (median age 75 years) who attended 2 classes per week for 10 weeks.
- Compared with adults who didn't take the classes, Feldenkrais Method balance classes significantly improved various measures, including Activities-Specific Balance Confidence, Four Square Step Test, and self-selected gait speed.
- These findings suggest that Feldenkrais Method balance classes may improve mobility and balance in older adults.

Prof Shaun Holt:

The Feldenkrais Method teaches slow and precise movement sequences which, via the neuromuscular system, can help muscles move outside of their habitual pattern and thereby theoretically make movements easier. This small but impressive study looked at its effectiveness in older people in the community with an average age of 75 years and found that balance classes based on these techniques did in fact improve mobility and balance in these older adults.

<http://tinyurl.com/79q48qm>

Research Review

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Serum taurine and risk of heart disease

The facts:

- Serum taurine levels were measured in 223 women with heart disease and compared with those in 223 age-matched healthy women to evaluate the association between circulating taurine levels and risk of heart disease.
- Subgroup analysis found that high taurine levels reduced the risk of heart disease in women with high total cholesterol levels: in this group those with the highest serum taurine levels were much less likely to develop heart disease than those with the lowest levels.
- There was no statistically significant association between serum taurine levels and the risk of heart disease in the overall study population.



Prof Shaun Holt:

1 part in 1,000 of you is taurine, an organic acid and a major component of bile, which is mostly found in the large intestine. This study found that for people with high serum cholesterol levels, taurine supplements or eating taurine rich foods may help to prevent coronary heart disease. Supplements are readily available and are commonly used by athletes who want to "bulk up", as taurine is important for muscles. It's too early to recommend it based just on this study, but it will be very interesting to see what future research reveals.

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/211253v4q282jq00/>

Retinol supplements may protect against skin cancer

The facts:

- The impact of retinol intake on melanoma risk was evaluated in almost 70,000 people over the age of 50 who consumed vitamin A through either dietary or supplementary methods.
- Retinol intake from supplements was associated with a reduction in melanoma risk that was stronger in women than in men, and in sun-exposed versus sun-protected parts of the body.
- Interestingly, dietary intake of vitamin A (from liver, eggs and milk) or carotenoids (carrots and tomatoes) had no impact on melanoma risk.

Prof Shaun Holt:

As I say in almost every issue of this review, associations do not PROVE that there is a causal effect, and controlled trials are needed for this proof, but they certainly provide strong clues. This study found such an association - people who took retinol regularly were 60 per cent less likely to develop skin cancer, rising to 74 per cent of people who took the highest doses. Certainly very interesting, and if proved to be correct, this would be a major step forward in the fight against melanoma, which in many countries is the cancer whose rate is increasing the fastest.

<http://www.nature.com/jid/journal/vaop/ncurrent/abs/jid201221a.html>



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