

APPLIED EVIDENCE

Vitamin supplementation in healthy patients: What does the evidence support?

This review, with handy tables, summarizes which vitamins offer proven benefits—and which don't

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IN THIS ARTICLE

Applicable vitamins for potential deficiencies

page 29

At-a-glance evidence for vitamin supplementation

page 30

Since their discovery in the early 1900s as the treatment for life-threatening deficiency syndromes, vitamins have been touted as panaceas for numerous ailments. While observational data have suggested potential correlations between vitamin status and every imaginable disease, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have generally failed to find benefits from supplementation. Despite this lack of proven efficacy, more than half of older adults reported taking vitamins regularly.¹

While most clinicians consider vitamins to be, at worst, expensive placebos, the potential for harm and dangerous interactions exists. Unlike pharmaceuticals, vitamins are generally unregulated, and the true content of many dietary supplements is often difficult to elucidate. Understanding the physiologic role, foundational evidence, and specific indications for the various vitamins is key to providing the best recommendations to patients.

Vitamins are essential organic nutrients, required in small quantities for normal metabolism. Since they are not synthesized endogenously, they must be ingested via food intake. In the developed world, vitamin deficiency

syndromes are rare, thanks to sufficiently balanced diets and availability of fortified foods. The focus of this article will be on vitamin supplementation in healthy patients with well-balanced diets. **TABLE E1**² (available with the online version of this article at mdedge.com/obgyn) lists the 13 recognized vitamins, their recommended dietary allowances, and any known toxicity risks. **TABLE 2**² outlines elements of the history to consider when evaluating for deficiency. A summary of the most clinically significant evidence for vitamin supplementation follows; a more comprehensive review can be found in **TABLE 3**.³⁻⁹⁶

B Complex vitamins

Vitamin B1

Vitamins: Thiamine (thiamin)

Physiologic role: Critical in carbohydrate and amino-acid catabolism and energy metabolism

Dietary sources: Whole grains, meat, fish, fortified cereals, and breads

Thiamine serves as an essential cofactor in energy metabolism.² Thiamine deficiency is responsible for beriberi syndrome (rare in the developed world) and Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome, the latter of which is a relatively common complication of chronic alcohol dependence. Although thiamine's administration in these conditions can be curative, evidence is lacking to support its use preventively in patients with alcoholism.³ Thiamine has additionally been

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theorized to play a role in cardiac and cognitive function, but RCT data has not shown consistent patient-oriented benefits.^{4,5}

The takeaway: Given the lack of evidence, supplementation in the general population is not recommended.

Vitamin B2

Vitamins: Riboflavin

Physiologic role: Essential component of cellular function and growth, energy production, and metabolism of fats and drugs

Dietary sources: Eggs, organ meats, lean meats, milk, green vegetables, fortified cereals and grains

Riboflavin is essential to energy production, cellular growth, and metabolism.²

The takeaway: Its use as migraine prophylaxis has limited data,⁹⁷ but there is otherwise no evidence to support health benefits of riboflavin supplementation.

Vitamin B3

Vitamins: Nicotinic acid (niacin); nicotinamide (niacinamide); nicotinamide riboside

Physiologic role: Converted to nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide (NAD), which is widely required in most cellular metabolic redox processes. Crucial to the synthesis and metabolism of carbohydrates, fatty acids, and proteins

Dietary sources: Poultry, beef, fish, nuts, legumes, grains. (Tryptophan can also be converted to NAD.)

Niacin is readily converted to NAD, an essential coenzyme for multiple catalytic processes in the body. While niacin at doses more than 100 times the recommended dietary allowance (RDA; 1-3 g/d) has been extensively studied for its role in dyslipidemias,² pharmacologic dosing is beyond the scope of this article.

The takeaway: There is no evidence supporting a clinical benefit from niacin supplementation.

Vitamin B5

Vitamins: Pantothenic acid; pantethin

Physiologic role: Required for synthesis of coenzyme A (CoA) and acyl carrier protein, both essential in fatty acid and other anabolic/catabolic processes.

TABLE 2 Relevant history in the evaluation of potential vitamin deficiency

Historical element	Applicable vitamin(s)
<i>Screening questions</i>	
Are there any food groups that you avoid in their entirety?	Multiple
How often do you eat animal products such as meat or dairy?	Vitamin B12, riboflavin
<i>Chronic conditions</i>	
Chronic kidney disease	Vitamin D
Conditions causing increased utilization: hemolysis, sickle cell anemia, thalassemia, neurologic disorders, exfoliative dermatitis, transplant, chemotherapy	Multiple
Gastrointestinal/malabsorptive conditions	Multiple
Genetic conditions	Multiple
History of gastric bypass	Multiple
Lactation	Multiple
Mental health conditions that limit diet (eg, anorexia, dementia, autism)	Multiple
Pregnancy	Folate
Osteoporosis	Vitamin D
<i>Medications</i>	
Antibiotics (chronic use)	Vitamin K
Antiepileptics	Vitamin B6, folate
Antiretrovirals	Multiple
H2 receptor antagonists	Vitamin B12
Isoniazid	Vitamin B6
Metformin	Vitamin B12
Methotrexate	Vitamin B6
Phenytoin	Vitamin B6
Proton pump inhibitors	Vitamin B12
Vitamin K antagonists	Vitamin K
<i>Social/diet history</i>	
Chronic alcohol use disorder	Multiple
Extreme northern climate	Vitamin D
Institutionalized/homebound	Multiple
Ketogenic diet	B-vitamins
Large amounts of raw egg whites	Biotin
Poverty/homelessness	Multiple
Vegetarian/vegan diet	Vitamin B12, riboflavin

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30

TABLE 3 Vitamin supplementation: The evidence at a glance

Vitamin	Disease/function	Evidence summary	Quality/type of evidence
B1	Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome	No well-defined, evidence-based regimen for prevention or treatment in people with alcoholism	Cochrane review of RCTs ³
	HF	Higher prevalence of deficiency among HF patients. Supplementation may improve left ventricular ejection fraction; no effect on mortality or patient-oriented outcomes	Systematic review of RCTs ⁴
	Alzheimer disease/dementia	Data too limited and low quality to draw conclusions	Cochrane review of RCTs ⁵
B2	Migraine	400 mg/d reduced migraine frequency (NNT = 2.3 for 50% headache frequency reduction) in adults	1 small RCT ⁶
	Cancer	No consistent effect on cancer rates	Large cohort studies ⁷⁻¹¹
B3	Cancer	No effect on cancer rates	Large cohort study ⁸
B5	Cardiovascular disease	Pantethine (a form of vitamin B5) reduced LDL 10%-20%, reduced triglycerides 15%-30%, and increased HDL 6%-8%. No mortality or patient-oriented benefits	Systematic review of RCTs ¹²
B6	Stroke	In conjunction with B9/B12, found to reduce stroke risk after 5 years of supplementation (HR = 0.75; 95% CI, 0.59-0.97)	1 large RCT ¹³
	Cancer	No consistent effect on cancer rates	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ¹⁴⁻¹⁶
	Cognitive function	No effect on cognitive function	2 systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{17,18}
	Pregnancy-associated nausea and vomiting	Recommended by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists; inconsistent data of benefit	Meta-analysis/society guideline ^{19,20}
B7	Hair, nail, and skin health	Potential increased nail thickness. Case reports suggest improved hair/skin health.	Small, disease-oriented RCTs, case reports ²
B9/B12	Preconception	Folate recommended for women of childbearing age; found to reduce risk of neural tube defects (RR = 0.31; 95% CI, 0.17-0.58). No consistent evidence of effect on other birth defects.	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ²¹⁻²⁶
	Cancer	Inconsistent evidence on effects in cancer; some studies have shown increased risk of colon cancer	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{27-29,30}
	Cardiovascular disease	No effect on cardiovascular events or mortality	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{31,32}
	Cognitive function	No consistent effect on cognitive function	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{18,33-35}
	Fractures	No evidence of decreased fracture risk	Large RCTs ^{29,36}
Antioxidants (A, E, and C)	AMD	Small reduction in risk of advanced AMD when combined with zinc (OR = 0.72; 95% CI, 0.52-0.98)	Large RCT ³⁷
	Cancer	Observational data suggest slightly decreased colon cancer risk associated with vitamin C and E. RCT data show no effect of supplementation on cancer rates	Large RCT, 2 pooled analyses of cohort studies ³⁸⁻⁴⁰
	Cardiovascular disease	No association with cardiovascular disease	Systematic review ⁴¹
	Cataracts	No effect on age-related cataracts	Cochrane review of RCTs ⁴²
	Dementia	No effect on risk of Alzheimer disease	2 systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{35,43}

TABLE CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

TABLE 3 Vitamin supplementation: The evidence at a glance (continued)

Vitamin	Disease/function	Evidence summary	Quality/type of evidence
A	Bone density	Retinol supplementation is associated with decreased bone mineral density and in some studies, increased fracture risk	Systematic review ⁴⁴
	Cancer	Beta-carotene associated with increased cancer mortality among smokers and asbestos workers. No benefit on cancer rates	Systematic review /meta-analysis ⁴¹
	Childhood mortality	Vitamin A supplementation in children ages 4-60 months reduced mortality 22% (95% CI, 10%-32%) in nations at high risk of vitamin A deficiency	Meta-analysis ⁴⁵
E	All-cause mortality	Increased risk of all-cause mortality with supplementation of ≥ 400 IU/d of vitamin E (RR = 1.04; 95% CI 1.01-1.07)	Meta-analysis ⁴⁶
	Cancer	No benefit from supplementation on cancer rates. May increase risk of prostate cancer (HR = 1.17; 99% CI, 1.004-1.36)	Systematic review/ meta-analysis, RCT ^{41,47}
C	Common cold	No significant reduction in incidence of cold. May reduce duration by 8% (95% CI, 3%-12%). May decrease incidence in those subjected to brief, intense exercise and/or cold temperatures	Cochrane review of RCTs ⁴⁸

TABLE CONTINUED ON PAGE 33

Dietary sources: Almost all plant/animal-based foods. Richest sources include beef, chicken, organ meats, whole grains, and some vegetables

Pantothenic acid is essential to multiple metabolic processes and readily available in sufficient amounts in most foods.² Although limited RCT data suggest pantethine may improve lipid measures,^{12,98,99} pantothenic acid itself does not seem to share this effect.

The takeaway: There is no data that supplementation of any form of vitamin B5 has any patient-oriented clinical benefits.

Vitamin B6

Vitamins: Pyridoxine; pyridoxamine; pyridoxal

Physiologic role: Widely involved coenzyme for cognitive development, neurotransmitter biosynthesis, homocysteine and glucose metabolism, immune function, and hemoglobin formation

Dietary sources: Fish, organ meats, potatoes/starchy vegetables, fruit (other than citrus), and fortified cereals

Pyridoxine is required for numerous enzymatic processes in the body, including biosynthesis of neurotransmitters and homeostasis of

the amino acid homocysteine.² While overt deficiency is rare, marginal insufficiency may become clinically apparent and has been associated with malabsorption, malignancies, pregnancy, heart disease, alcoholism, and use of drugs such as isoniazid, hydralazine, and levodopa/carbidopa.² Vitamin B6 supplementation is known to decrease plasma homocysteine levels, a theorized intermediary for cardiovascular disease; however, studies have failed to consistently demonstrate patient-oriented benefits.¹⁰⁰⁻¹⁰² While observational data has suggested a correlation between vitamin B6 status and cancer risk, RCTs have not supported benefit from supplementation.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Potential effects of vitamin B6 supplementation on cognitive function have also been studied without observed benefit.^{17,18}

The takeaway: Vitamin B6 is recommended as a potential treatment option for nausea in pregnancy.¹⁹ Otherwise, vitamin B6 is readily available in food, deficiency is rare, and no patient-oriented evidence supports supplementation in the general population.

Vitamin B7

Vitamins: Biotin

Physiologic role: Cofactor in the metabolism

TABLE 3 Vitamin supplementation: The evidence at a glance (continued)

Vitamin	Disease/function	Evidence summary	Quality/type of evidence
D	Fractures/bone density	Vitamin D + calcium supplementation may reduce hip fracture risk in older adults (RR = 0.84; 95% CI, 0.74-0.96). No effect on fracture risk with vitamin D alone	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ⁴⁹⁻⁵¹
		No significant effect on bone mineral density in healthy children	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{52,53}
	Falls	No consistent effect on falls risk in community-dwelling elders. Small reduction in rate of falls among institutionalized elders (RaR, 0.72; 95% CI, 0.55-0.95)	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ⁵⁴⁻⁵⁷
	All-cause mortality	No consistent effect on all-cause mortality	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{41,58-62}
	Cancer	No effect on cancer rates	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{41,62-66}
	Cardiovascular disease	No effect on cardiovascular disease outcomes	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{41,67-69}
		No effect on hypertension	2 systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{70,71}
	Dementia	No effect on cognitive function	2 systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{43,72}
	Chronic pain	No effect on chronic pain control or outcomes	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ⁷³⁻⁷⁵
	Pregnancy adverse outcomes	Reduction in risk of pre-eclampsia (RR = 0.48; 95% CI, 0.30-0.79). Reduction of risk of low birthweight infants (RR = 0.55; CI, 0.35-0.87). No effect on rates of asthma or allergic disease in infants	Multiple systematic reviews/meta-analyses ⁷⁶⁻⁸²
	Upper respiratory infections	Reduction in risk of acute respiratory infection (OR = 0.88; 95% CI, 0.81-0.96)	Systematic review/meta-analysis ⁸³
	Asthma	Reduction in rate of exacerbation requiring corticosteroids (aRR = 0.74; 95% CI, 0.56-0.97)	Meta-analysis ⁸⁴
	Obesity	No effect on BMI	Systematic review/meta-analysis ⁸⁵
	Depression	No effect on depression scores or rates	2 systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{86,87}
Diabetes	Low-quality/heterogenous data showing small reduction of A1C in those with type 2 diabetes (-0.32%; 95% CI, -0.53 to -0.10). No effect on rate of progression to diabetes	Systematic review and RCT ^{88,89}	
Liver disease	No effect on liver-related morbidity or quality of life	Systematic review/meta-analysis ⁹⁰	

TABLE CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

of fatty acids, glucose, and amino acids. Also plays key role in histone modifications, gene regulation, and cell signaling

Dietary sources: Widely available; most prevalent in organ meats, fish, meat, seeds, nuts, and vegetables (eg, sweet potatoes). Whole cooked eggs are a major source,

but raw eggs contain avidin, which blocks absorption

Biotin serves a key role in metabolism, gene regulation, and cell signaling.² Biotin is known to interfere with laboratory assays— including cardiac enzymes, thyroid studies, and hormone studies—at normal

TABLE 3 Vitamin supplementation: The evidence at a glance (continued)

Vitamin	Disease/function	Evidence summary	Quality/type of evidence
Vitamin K	Vitamin K deficiency bleeding in newborns	Intramuscular prophylaxis following delivery reduced risk of moderate-to-severe bleeding (RR = 0.19; CI, 0.08 to 0.46; NNT = 74) and reduced risk of bleeding after circumcision (RR = 0.18; CI, 0.08 to 0.42; NNT = 9)	Systematic review of RCTs/observational studies ⁹¹
	Fractures/bone density	Potential benefit of supplementation on fracture risk (OR = 0.72; 95% CI, 0.55-0.95). Inconsistent data for effect on bone mineral density and vertebral fracture	2 systematic reviews/meta-analyses ^{92,93}
	Heart disease	Observational data showing potential association between dietary intake and cardiovascular disease risk. No RCT data on supplementation	Systematic review of observational studies ⁹⁴
Multivitamins	All-cause mortality	No effect on all-cause mortality	Systematic review of 2 large RCTs ⁴¹
	Cancer	Borderline decrease in cancer rates in men (RR = 0.93; 95% CI, 0.87-0.99). No effect on cancer rates among women or pooled population	Systematic review of 2 large RCTs ⁴¹
	Cognitive function	No effect on cognitive function	Large RCT ⁹⁵
	Cataract/AMD	Small reduction in cataract incidence (HR = 0.91; 95% CI, 0.83-0.99). No effect on AMD	Large RCT ⁹⁶

Abbreviations: aIRR, adjusted incidence rate ratio; AMD, age-related macular degeneration; BMI, body mass index; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; HF, heart failure; HR, hazard ratio; LDL, low-density lipoprotein; NNT, number needed to treat; OR, odds ratio; RaR, rate ratio; RCTs, randomized controlled trials; RR, relative risk.

supplementation doses, resulting in both false-positive and false-negative results.¹⁰³

The takeaway: No evidence supports the health benefits of biotin supplementation.

Vitamin B9

Vitamins: Folate; folic acid

Physiologic role: Functions as a coenzyme in the synthesis of DNA/RNA and metabolism of amino acids

Dietary sources: Highest content in spinach, liver, asparagus, and brussels sprouts. Generally found in green leafy vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans, peas, seafood, eggs, dairy, meat, poultry, grains, and fortified cereals.

Vitamin B12

Vitamins: Cyanocobalamin; hydroxocobalamin; methylcobalamin; adenosylcobalamin

Physiologic role: Required for red blood cell formation, neurologic function, and DNA synthesis

Dietary sources: Only in animal products: fish, poultry, meat, eggs, and milk/dairy products. Not present in plant foods.

Fortified cereals, nutritional yeast are sources for vegans/vegetarians.

Given their linked physiologic roles, vitamins B9 and B12 are frequently studied together. Folate and cobalamins play key roles in nucleic acid synthesis and amino acid metabolism, with their most clinically significant role in hematopoiesis. Vitamin B12 is also essential to normal neurologic function.²

The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends preconceptual folate supplementation of 0.4-0.8 mg/d in women of childbearing age to decrease the risk of fetal neural tube defects (grade A).²¹ This is supported by high-quality RCT evidence demonstrating a protective effect of daily folate supplementation in preventing neural tube defects.²² Folate supplementation's effect on other fetal birth defects has been investigated, but no benefit has been demonstrated. While observational studies have suggested an inverse relationship with folate status and fetal autism spectrum disorder,²³⁻²⁵ the RCT data is mixed.²⁶

A potential role for folate in cancer prevention has been extensively investigated.

An expert panel of the National Toxicology Program (NTP) concluded that folate supplementation does not reduce cancer risk in people with adequate baseline folate status based on high-quality meta-analysis data.^{27,104} Conversely, long-term follow-up from RCTs demonstrated an increased risk of colorectal adenomas and cancers,^{28,29} leading the NTP panel to conclude there is sufficient concern for adverse effects of folate on cancer growth to justify further research.¹⁰⁴

While observational studies have found a correlation of increased risk for disease with lower antioxidant serum levels, RCTs have not demonstrated a reduction in disease risk with supplementation.

Given folate and vitamin B12's homocysteine-reducing effects, it has been theorized that supplementation may protect from cardiovascular disease. However, despite extensive research, there remains no consistent patient-oriented outcomes data to support such a benefit.^{31,32,105}

The evidence is mixed but generally has found no benefit of folate or vitamin B12 supplementation on cognitive function.^{18,33-35} Finally, RCT data has failed to demonstrate a reduction in fracture risk with supplementation.^{36,106}

The takeaway: High-quality RCT evidence demonstrates a protective effect of preconceptual daily folate supplementation in preventing neural tube defects.²² The USPSTF recommends preconceptual folate supplementation of 0.4-0.8 mg/d in women of childbearing age to decrease the risk of fetal neural tube defects.

Antioxidants

In addition to their individual roles, vitamins A, E, and C are antioxidants, functioning to protect cells from oxidative damage by free radical species.² Due to this shared role, these vitamins are commonly studied together. Antioxidants are hypothesized to protect from various diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, dementia, autoimmune disorders, depression, cataracts, and age-related vision decline.^{2,37,107-112}

Though observational studies have found a correlation of increased risk for disease with

lower antioxidant serum levels, RCTs have not demonstrated a reduction in disease risk with supplementation and, in some cases, have found an increased risk of mortality. While several studies have found potential benefit of antioxidant use in reducing colon and breast cancer risk,^{38,113-115} vitamins A and E have been associated with increased risk of lung and prostate cancer, respectively.^{47,110} Cardiovascular disease and antioxidant vitamin supplementation has similar inconsistent data, ranging from slight benefit to harm.^{2,116} After a large Cochrane review in 2012 found a significant increase in all-cause mortality associated with vitamin E and beta-carotene,¹¹⁷ the USPSTF made a specific recommendation against supplementation of these vitamins for the prevention of cardiovascular disease or cancer (grade D).¹¹⁸ Given its limited risk for harm, vitamin C was excluded from this recommendation.

Vitamin A

Vitamins: Retinol; retinal; retinyl esters; provitamin A carotenoids (beta-carotene, alpha-carotene, beta-cryptoxanthin)

Physiologic role: Essential for vision and corneal development. Also involved in general cell differentiation and immune function

Dietary sources: Liver, fish oil, dairy, and fortified cereals. Provitamin A sources: leafy green vegetables, orange/yellow vegetables, tomato products, fruits, and vegetable oils

Retinoids and their precursors, carotenoids, serve a critical function in vision, as well as regulating cell differentiation and proliferation throughout the body.² While evidence suggests mortality benefit of supplementation in populations at risk of deficiency,⁴⁵ wide-ranging studies have found either inconsistent benefit or outright harms in the developed world.

The takeaway: Given the USPSTF grade “D” recommendation and concern for potential harms, supplementation is not recommended in healthy patients without risk factors for deficiency.²

Vitamin E

Vitamins: Tocopherols (alpha-, beta-, gamma-, delta-); tocotrienol (alpha-, beta-, gamma-, delta-)

Physiologic role: Antioxidant; protects

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Vitamins A, E, and C are antioxidants, which although protect cells from oxidative damage, have inconsistent data for reducing diseases such as cancer and CVD

polyunsaturated fats from free radical oxidative damage. Involved in immune function, cell signaling, and regulation of gene expression

Dietary sources: Nuts, seeds, vegetable oil, green leafy vegetables, and fortified cereals

Vitamin E is the collective name of 8 compounds; alpha-tocopherol is the physiologically active form. Vitamin E is involved with cell proliferation as well as endothelial and platelet function.²

The takeaway: Vitamin E supplementation's effects on cancer, cardiovascular disease, ophthalmologic disorders, and cognition have been investigated; data is either lacking to support a benefit or demonstrates harms as outlined above. Given this and the USPSTF grade "D" recommendation, supplementation is not recommended in healthy patients.²

Vitamin C

Vitamins: Ascorbic acid

Physiologic role: Required for synthesis of collagen, L-carnitine, and some neurotransmitters. Also involved in protein metabolism

Dietary sources: Primarily in fruits and vegetables: citrus, tomato, potatoes, red/green peppers, kiwi fruit, broccoli, strawberries, brussels sprouts, cantaloupe, and fortified cereals

Vitamin C supplementation at the onset of illness does not seem to have benefit.

Ascorbic acid is a required cofactor for biosynthesis of collagen, neurotransmitters, and protein metabolism.² In addition to the shared hypothesized benefits of antioxidants, vitamin C supplementation has undergone extensive research into its potential role in augmenting the immune system and preventing the common cold. Systematic reviews have found daily vitamin C supplementation of at least 200 mg did not affect the incidence of the common cold in healthy adults but may shorten duration and could be of benefit in those exposed to extreme physical exercise or cold.⁴⁸ Vitamin C supplementation at the onset of illness does not seem to have benefit.⁴⁸ Data is insufficient to draw conclusions about a potential effect on pneumonia incidence or severity.^{119,120}

The takeaway: Overall, data remain inconclusive as to potential benefits of vitamin C supplementation, although risks of potential harms are likely low.

Vitamin D

Vitamins: Cholecalciferol (D3); ergocalciferol (D2)

Physiologic role: Hydroxylation in liver and kidney required to activate. Promotes dietary calcium absorption, enables normal bone mineralization. Also involved in modulation of cell growth, and neuromuscular and immune function

Dietary sources: Few natural dietary sources, which include fatty fish, fish liver oils; small amount in beef liver, cheese, egg yolks. Primary sources include fortified milk and endogenous synthesis in skin with UV exposure

Calciferol is a fat-soluble vitamin required for calcium and bone homeostasis. It is not naturally available in many foods but is primarily produced endogenously in the skin with ultraviolet light exposure.²

The AAP recommends supplementing exclusively breastfed infants with 400 IU/d of vitamin D to prevent rickets.

Bone density and fracture risk reduction are the most often cited benefits of vitamin D supplementation, but this has not been demonstrated consistently in RCTs. Multiple systematic reviews showing inconsistent benefit of vitamin D (with or without calcium) on fracture risk led the USPSTF to conclude that there is insufficient evidence (grade I) to issue a recommendation on vitamin D and calcium supplementation for primary prevention of fractures in postmenopausal women.⁴⁹⁻⁵¹ Despite some initial evidence suggesting a benefit of vitamin D supplementation on falls reduction, 3 recent systematic reviews did not demonstrate this in community-dwelling elders,⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ although a separate Cochrane review did suggest a reduction in rate of falls among institutionalized elders.⁵⁷

The takeaway: Given these findings, the USPSTF has recommended against (grade D) vitamin D supplementation to prevent falls in community-dwelling elders.⁵⁵

Beyond falls. While the vitamin D receptor

FAST TRACK

The USPSTF has recommended against vitamin D supplementation to prevent falls in community-dwelling elders

is expressed throughout the body and observational studies have suggested a correlation between vitamin D status and many outcomes, extensive RCT data has generally failed to demonstrate extraskeletal benefits from supplementation. Meta-analysis data have demonstrated potential reductions in acute respiratory infection rates and asthma exacerbations with vitamin D supplementation. There is also limited evidence suggesting a reduction in preeclampsia and low-birth-weight infant risk with vitamin D supplementation in pregnancy. However, several large meta-analyses and systematic reviews have investigated vitamin D supplementation's effect on all-cause mortality and found no consistent data to support an association.^{41,58-62} Multiple systematic reviews have investigated and found high-quality evidence demonstrating no association between vitamin D supplementation and cancer^{41,63-66,121} or cardiovascular disease risk.^{41,70,71} There is high-quality data showing no benefit of vitamin D supplementation for multiple additional diseases, including diabetes, cognitive decline, depression, pain, obesity, and liver disease.^{43,72-75,85-90,122}

The takeaway: Due to poor availability in breastmilk, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends supplementing exclusively breastfed infants with 400 IU/d of vitamin D to prevent rickets.¹²³ RCT data support high-dose supplementation of lactating women (6400 IU/d) as an alternative strategy to supplementation of the infant.¹²⁴ The AAP recommends that all nonbreastfeeding infants and older children ingesting < 1000 mL/d of vitamin D-fortified formula or milk should also be supplemented with 400 IU/d of vitamin D.¹²³ Despite these universal recommendations for supplementation, evidence is mixed on the effect of vitamin D supplementation on bone health in children.^{52,53}

Although concerns about vitamin D supplementation and increased risk of urolithiasis and hypercalcemia have been raised,^{51,62,121} systematic reviews have not demonstrated significant, clinically relevant risks, even with high-dose supplementation (> 2800 IU/d).^{125,126}

Vitamin K

Vitamins: Phylloquinone (K1); menaquinones (K2)

Physiologic role: Coenzyme for synthesis of proteins involved in hemostasis and bone metabolism

Dietary sources: Phylloquinone is found in green leafy vegetables, vegetable oils, some fruits, meat, dairy, and eggs. Menaquinone is produced by gut bacteria and present in fermented foods

Vitamin K includes 2 groups of similar compounds: phylloquinone and menaquinones. Unlike other fat-soluble vitamins, vitamin K is rapidly metabolized and has low tissue storage.² Children taking multivitamins were often found to have excess levels of potentially harmful nutrients, such as retinol, zinc, and folic acid. Administration of vitamin K 0.5 to 1 mg intramuscularly (IM) to newborns is standard of care for the prevention of vitamin K deficiency bleeding (VKDB). This is supported by RCT data demonstrating a reduction in classic VKDB (occurring within 7 days)⁹¹ and epidemiologic data from various countries showing a reduction in late-onset VKDB with vitamin K prophylaxis programs.¹²⁷ Oral dosing appears to reduce the risk of VKDB in the setting of parental refusal but is less effective than IM dosing.^{128,129}

Vitamin K's effects on bone density and fracture risk have also been investigated. Systematic reviews have demonstrated a reduction in fracture risk with vitamin K supplementation,^{92,93} and European and Asian regulatory bodies have recognized a potential benefit on bone health.² The FDA considers the evidence insufficient at this time to support such a claim.² Higher dietary vitamin K consumption has been associated with lower risk of cardiovascular disease in observational studies⁹⁴ and supplementation was associated with improved disease measures,¹³⁰ but no patient-oriented outcomes have been demonstrated.¹³¹

The takeaway: The administration of vitamin K 0.5 to 1 mg intramuscularly (IM) to newborns is standard of care for the prevention of VKDB. Vitamin K may lead to a reduction in fracture risk, but the FDA considers the evidence

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There is limited evidence to support vitamin D supplementation in pregnancy to reduce preeclampsia and low-birth weight risk

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

insufficient. Vitamin K's potential link to a lowered risk of cardiovascular disease has not been demonstrated with patient-oriented outcomes. Vitamin K has low potential for toxicity, although its interaction with vitamin K antagonists (ie, warfarin) is clinically relevant.

Multivitamins

Multivitamins are often defined as a supplement containing 3 or more vitamins and minerals but without herbs, hormones, or drugs.¹³² Many multivitamins do contain additional substances, and some include levels of vitamins that exceed the RDA or even the established tolerable upper intake level.¹³³ Safe medication storage should be practiced, as multivitamins with iron are a leading cause of poisoning in children.

A 2013 systematic review found limited evidence to support any benefit from multivitamin supplementation.⁴¹ Two included RCTs demonstrated a narrowly significant decrease in cancer rates among men, but saw no effect in women or the combined population.^{134,135} This benefit appears to disappear at 5 years of follow-up.¹³⁶ RCT data have shown no benefit of multivitamin use on cognitive function,⁹⁵ and high-quality data suggest there is no effect on all-cause mortality.¹³⁷ Given this lack of supporting evidence, the USPSTF has concluded that there is insufficient evidence (grade I) to recommend vitamin supplementation in general to prevent cardiovascular disease or cancer.⁴¹

The use of prenatal multivitamins is generally recommended in the pregnancy and

preconception period and has been associated with reduced risk of autism spectrum disorders, pediatric cancer rates, small-for-gestational-age infants, and multiple birth defects in offspring; however, studies have not examined if this benefit exceeds that of folate supplementation alone.¹³⁸⁻¹⁴⁰ AAP does not recommend multivitamins for children with a well-balanced diet.¹⁴¹ Of concern, children taking multivitamins were often found to have excess levels of potentially harmful nutrients such as retinol, zinc, and folic acid.¹⁴²

The takeaway: Components such as vitamin K may interact with a patient's medications, and multivitamins have been shown to reduce the circulating levels of antiretrovirals.¹⁴⁴ Specifically, multivitamins with iron should be avoided in men and postmenopausal women, and safe medication storage should be practiced as multivitamins with iron are a leading cause of poisoning in children.

Summary

Vitamin supplementation in the developed world remains common despite a paucity of RCT data supporting it. Supplementation of folate in women planning to conceive, vitamin D in breastfeeding infants, and vitamin K in newborns are well supported by clinical evidence. Otherwise, there is limited evidence supporting clinically significant benefit from supplementation in healthy patients with well-balanced diets—and in the case of vitamins A and E, there may be outright harms. ●

For the complete list of references, see the online version of this article at mdedge.com/obgyn.