ask A Specialist

A weekly question/answer column

Should I Take A Vitamin E Supplement?

Georgia Lauritzen* answers:

Although vitamin E was discovered about 80 years ago, it has only been during the past 10 years that it has become the center of attention. The new interest is due to the long known primary function of vitamin E in the body as an antioxidant. The importance of antioxidants in chronic disease prevention has become clearer in recent scientific studies.

- According to data from the third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III), "important proportions" of the adult U.S. population have low serum alphatocopherol (vitamin E) levels. About 16,300 adults participated in the survey and 27% of them had low vitamin E concentrations.

- Low levels of vitamin E may place people at increased risk of chronic diseases. The incidence of both cancer and cardiovascular disease may be affected by low levels of vitamin E. Analysis of the data from the NHANES III study showed that age, serum cholesterol level and several serum vitamins and carotenoids (vitamin A) were related to serum vitamin E concentration.

- Several studies now in progress may provide evidence of adequate vitamin E levels in reducing chronic diseases.

- Should vitamin E be supplemented for the average person in the United States? The University of California, Berkeley, "Wellness Letter" that everyone take vitamin E supplements. Other nutrition authorities are hesitant to recommend that they be taken by everyone.

- Good food sources are vegetable oils and grains. Some cereal products are also fortified with vitamin E. Since many people are trying to limit total fat intake, the use of the vegetable oils is advised because of their vitamin E content. The general advice of eating a wide variety of foods is prudent since many foods, including fruits and vegetables, contain small amounts of vitamin E that, in total, make a significant contribution.

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* Georgia Lauritzen is Utah State University Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist