



Dietary supplements

Mortamins?

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SOME vitamins make you stronger. Others make your eyesight sharper, your hair shinier and your nails glossier. Now, though, it seems there are also vitamins which might give you prostate cancer or cut your life short in other ways. Two separate studies published this week sound a cautionary note for vitamin gobblers.



[Getty Images](#)

Researchers funded by America's National Institutes of Health set out to study whether vitamin E might decrease the risk of prostate cancer. To their astonishment, they discovered that it seems to do the exact opposite. The findings, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, come on the tail of a big cancer-prevention trial. As part of that trial's follow-up, Eric Klein of the Cleveland Clinic and his colleagues examined the effects of taking vitamin E supplements. They found a 17% increase in prostate cancer for men who took the vitamin, compared with those who took a placebo. The mechanism for this pernicious effect is unclear, and indeed the findings themselves are controversial. But the paper is the latest in a stream of damning research.

Perhaps even more disquieting were results published a few days earlier in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. In a study that looked at the health and habits of nearly 40,000 women over two decades, Jaakko Murso of the University of Eastern Finland showed that older women who admitted to taking multivitamins died at higher rates. This was despite the fact that the women who took supplements also tended to be slimmer and boast lower blood pressure than the women who did not. (Since supplement munching was self-reported, Dr Murso's study did not have a placebo control.)

None of this is to say that people must immediately bin all vitamin-containing substances; vitamins are, after all, essential nutrients. Moreover, untangling cause and effect in studies like these is notoriously tricky. And it does not help that the boffins themselves seem baffled by the results. That said, they ought to give pause to the most voracious supplement poppers. The Centre for Responsible Nutrition, an American group representing the industry which caters to them, promptly condemned the research as "a hunt for harm". That response was predictable—more than 150m Americans take vitamins each year, spending about \$27 billion

on the stuff.

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