Finnish Your Veggies

Study linking vitamins with cancer criticized

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Does a new Finnish study of vitamins in cancer prevention spell trouble for people who are HIV positive? Researchers found that after a lifetime of heavy smoking, older men taking small doses of beta carotene -- a nutrient also used by many people who are HIV positive -- had somewhat higher lung cancer rates than those on placebos. Amid fevered media reports of the “cancer risk” from a nutrient found in fruits and vegetables, nutritional educator and AIDS consultant Lark Lands Ph.D. counsels, “Don’t believe the hype.”

Lands criticizes the media’s omission of the researchers’ own caution: “We are aware of no other data, [animal or human], at this time, however, that suggest harmful effects of beta carotene, whereas there are data indicating benefit... In light of all the data available, an adverse effect of beta-carotene seems unlikely; therefore, this finding may well be due to chance.”

The study also found that small doses of Vitamin E, compared to a placebo, did not reduce lung cancer rates. Lands says, “It’s no surprise that after decades of immune-destroying behavior, people get no benefit from late intervention with low doses of an isolated nutrient.”

Several university studies have discovered that while people with HIV were found to be seriously deficient in many nutrients such as beta carotene and vitamin E, when their diets were amply supplemented (by beta carotene) they improved in immune function and certain symptoms were lessened. Says Lands, "Broad-spectrum supplementation *and* a nutrient-rich diet are vital for people who are HIV positive. We clearly need larger studies to further support and refine this."

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