The Missing Zinc

Shoring up an essential mineral can strengthen immune function and more

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Zinc is a mineral for all seasons. It helps the body build protein. Helps libido by maintaining testosterone level. Repairs taste and smell aversions that ruin appetite. Zaps zits and rashes. Teams up with vitamin A to alleviate night blindness. Most important to PWAs, it's essential for proper immune function, particularly of CD4 cells.

Research by the University of Miami has found that many people with HIV are deficient in this vital mineral (and many other nutrients)--starting early in the infection and accelerating from there. And zinc levels are lowered by both AZT use and diarrhea. Accordingly, supplementing at modest dosages appears to slow disease progression. One study found a 14-month-longer life expectancy for people with advanced AIDS taking zinc than for those in a control group. Another study found that AZT-treated participants taking zinc had far fewer opportunistic infections than those taking AZT alone.

But what about a publicized study--merely *observing*, not changing, PWAs' nutrient intakes--that found faster disease progression in those taking higher levels of zinc? HIV-nutrition specialist Lark Lands, PhD, argues: "The overwhelming weight of other evidence suggests this finding may simply be a fluke." She proposes that one possible explanation could lie in the complex relationship between zinc and copper.

"Zinc taken long term without sufficient copper to balance it can result in immune dysfunction," Lands says. Most experts recommend taking zinc and copper in a ratio of 10 to 1. And since copper competes with zinc for absorption, each at a separate meal.

Some telltale signs that may signal a zinc deficiency include night blindness, recurrent rashes or acne, slow-to-heal wounds, white spots on your nails, or cracks in the skin on your fingers. But you may be deficient even without these symptoms.

The richest food source of zinc is cooked shellfish; much smaller amounts are in other fish, red meat and poultry. Food alone probably won't supply PWAs with needed amounts. So supplements--in either tablet, capsule or liquid form--are advisable. Jon Kaiser, MD, a San Francisco AIDS practitioner, recommends a daily dose of 25-75 mg, not to exceed 100 mg (higher doses may cause toxicity), taken with food. Lands says the most absorbable forms are zinc picolinate and zinc

citrate. For best absorption, take zinc along with B-6 phosphate and vitamin A.

So, for your immune-boosting nutritional program, consider taking everything *and* the kitchen zinc.

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