

Two Biggest Misconceptions About Supplementation

By Dr. Steven Chaney

Dr. Stephen Chaney is a frequent spokesman for health and nutrition issues. As a professor of biochemistry, biophysics and nutrition at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, he teaches nutrition to medical students and has conducted a cancer research project for nearly 30 years. His name is on over 80 published studies in peer-reviewed journals.

This week I'm going to be talking about the two biggest misconceptions that people have about supplementation.

#1: Supplementation can cure disease.

I don't know how many times I've been asked "I have "disease X". What supplements should I take? - as if supplements were drugs that can be taken to cure a disease. We shouldn't think of supplements as drugs that cure diseases. We should think of them as providing the nutrients that are the building blocks of health - or perhaps the ammunition that the body uses to fight diseases. Diseases, after all, are an abnormal state of being, and our bodies have an amazing capacity to fight those diseases.

When we have infections or cancer our body activates its immune system to fight it. When we have inflammation our body tries to put out the fire. When we have damage to our DNA - our genetic information - our body tries to repair it. The list is almost endless. Our bodies are wondrously designed!

Our immune systems require nutrients like protein, B vitamins, antioxidants, zinc and iron. The omega-3 fatty acids, anti-oxidants and polyphenols like resveratrol are anti-inflammatory. Nutrients like antioxidants and polyphenols support DNA repair.

So proper diet and supplementation are not "magic bullets" that cure diseases. They are simply the building blocks that allow the body to do what it does best. And because no two of us are alike the nutrients that we need the most to allow our bodies to do their job efficiently may be different for each one of us.

So while there is no magic food or supplement that will cure a specific disease, a healthy diet and a holistic approach to supplementation can often work wonders.

#2: It doesn't matter what we eat.

This is the flip side of the coin. I often come across people who have been told by the "experts" that the cause of their disease was not related to diet so they shouldn't worry about what they eat and supplementation will not do any good.

Let's take the most extreme example - genetically caused diseases or serious degenerative diseases like multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's for which the causes are still not fully understood. It is generally true that these diseases were not caused by poor diet (MS may be the exception because there is some evidence that it can be caused by inadequate vitamin D during childhood). And I know many people who take the "expert's" advice to heart and eat whatever they like and consider supplementation a waste of money.

Is that a sound approach? Let's consider. Any nutritionist will tell us that an inadequate diet can lead to malaise, low energy, inflammation, weakened immune system and impaired wound healing - just to name a few maladies. Even if we don't end up with the symptoms of a nutritional deficiency a poor diet can rob us of energy and vitality. If we layer the consequences of a poor diet on top of the underlying disease, our chances of being able to cope with the disease and function optimally are greatly diminished.

I have come across many people with very serious diseases who are able to function at a very high level through proper diet and a holistic approach to supplementation. Diet and supplementation did not cure their disease as they quickly discover if they stop supplementing and go back to the way they used to eat, but in many cases we would consider them to be perfectly healthy as long as they keep doing what they have been doing.

So what is the bottom line?

1. There is no perfect food or supplement that is capable of curing disease, but if we give our body the nutrients that it needs it often has the ability to cure itself.
2. Proper diet and supplementation can make a difference even if the disease was not caused by poor nutrition.
3. Each of us have unique nutritional needs so in both cases a holistic approach to diet and supplementation is best.

I didn't specifically talk about weight control and exercise, but in my previous e- letters that I consider them to be an essential part of any holistic health program.

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