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On Drugs and Therapeutics

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Volume 54 (Issue 1386)
March 19, 2012

www.medicalletter.org

Clarification: Vitamin E (Med Lett Drugs Ther 2011; 53:101)

The recent Medical Letter article on vitamin supplements¹ included 2 sentences on vitamin E that could be misleading.

“Vitamin E in food, which is mostly gamma-tocopherol, acts as an antioxidant. Vitamin E in supplements is mostly alpha-tocopherol, which may block the anti-oxidant effect of gamma-tocopherol and may have a pro-oxidant effect *in vivo*.”

Gamma-tocopherol is the most common form of vitamin E in the North American diet, and supplements are mostly alpha-tocopherol, which can, under some conditions, have a pro-oxidant effect. However, there is no evidence that taking supplements can block the antioxidant effect of vitamin E in food. Whether the pro-oxidant effect of alpha-tocopherol, which is also plentiful in food, has any biological importance is unclear.²

1. Who should take vitamin supplements? Med Lett Drugs Ther 2011; 53:101.
2. VW Bowry et al. Vitamin E in human low-density lipoprotein. When and how this antioxidant becomes a pro-oxidant. Biochem J 1992; 288 (Pt 2):341.

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