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Interview on nutritional supplements

Fact vs. Fiction

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Dr. Elizabeth Chen Christenson clears up some major misconceptions about supplements and gives her top recommendations.

Bio

Elizabeth Chen Christenson isn't your traditional M.D.: This family medicine, integrative medicine and Chinese medicine specialist bridges Eastern and Western traditions. Dr. Christenson teaches both in the University of Hawaii medical school's Complementary and Alternative Medicine department, and at the Institute of Clinical Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in Hawaii. She leads qigong classes at Castle Medical Center and has released a CD, "Meditative Therapeutic Harp. In her holistic private practice she coaches patients on healthy lifestyle and preventive medicine.

(Reach Dr. Christenson at 808-261-7801; www.chimedicalcenter.com)

AL: Who needs nutritional supplements?

Dr. Christenson: Well, first of all, what do we mean by supplement? Let's define them as vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, probiotics, herbal products, and omega fatty acids such as fish oil.

Who needs supplements? Today many unhealthy behaviors and practices occur within our lifestyles. The majority of people don't eat healthy food or exercise adequately. We are over-nourished by excess caloric intake and deficient in essential nutrients such as vitamins and minerals. It is unlikely that people are going to improve their diet to include appropriate amounts of whole fruits and vegetables.

So, many people may benefit from the use of supplements. This is especially true for teenagers, pregnant or breast feeding women, undernourished people or elders. Persons with allergies or intolerance to certain foods may benefit as well.

Supplements also help prevent diseases resulting from deficiency of essential nutrients—for example, scurvy from vitamin C deficiency and beriberi from thiamine deficiency. We also can take vitamins and supplements to promote maximum wellness.

AL: What are the basic supplements everyone should consider?

Dr. Christenson: The best way to get your vitamins and minerals is through a healthy balanced diet. A healthy diet includes at least five servings a day of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. This type of diet has adequate amounts of vitamins, minerals and

antioxidants. Virtually all colorful foods like tomatoes, squash, oranges, blueberries and red peppers have antioxidants.

A multivitamin containing 100 percent of the recommended daily allowance of common vitamins and minerals can help us get the vitamins and minerals we need. Anyone with a specific health problem should discuss supplementation with a nutritionist.

AL: What are the most common misconceptions about supplements?

Dr. Christenson: People think vitamins can cure an illness. Some people have a perception that supplements are natural and therefore are "safe and good for you." But natural doesn't always translate into safe.

People used to think if a little is good for you, then a lot must be great. That's not always true. Supplements can be harmful if you take too much.

People also believe that if they take basic vitamins, then they don't have to eat healthy food. This is not true!

AL: Do you have any cautions or advice about buying nutritional supplements?

Dr. Christenson: Yes, because supplements by law are not regulated in the same way as drugs. We must be careful and avoid marketing hype. Anything that seems too good to be true is probably not true.

Advice should be sought from professionals who are well trained in nutrition. They can help you find a reputable company that uses good manufacturing practices and has good quality control. Look for the GMP and USPV or NFS mark on the label. These marks mean the product has been tested in a laboratory and meets standards of quality.

AL: Can supplements cause harm?

Dr. Christenson: Yes. Some natural products such as nightshade or hemlock can be toxic when ingested. Some supplements can cause allergic reactions.

Another concern is the potential of interactions between supplements and prescription drugs. You must consult with your doctors if you are taking prescribed medications.

A supplement can also be harmful because its quality or purity may be compromised. There have been reports of contamination with toxic heavy metals or bacteria or fungus, any of which can cause illness.

Another problem is that some companies may add pharmaceuticals to nutritional supplements to boost effectiveness. The U.S. government has inadequate manpower to inspect and protect people from all bad products. That's why I recommend people check with health care professionals for guidance about taking supplements to find out what the latest precautions are.

AL: How can people find out if certain supplements are effective?

Dr. Christenson: Talk to a doctor or nutritionist and find out if a supplement can help improve a certain condition. There is a vast amount of information on the Internet. However, there is also a lot of misleading and erroneous information. I would recommend people talk to doctors who have legitimate credentials, such as those in the UH medical school's Complementary & Alternative Medicine Department.

I wouldn't recommend self-medicating, or taking nutritional supplements to treat a specific condition like insomnia, for example.

Many herbal supplements can interact with pharmaceutical drugs, and this can alter the function of the drugs. For example, a high dose of omega-3 fatty acids, or more than 3 grams per day, increases the risk of bleeding. Blood-thinning herbs like garlic may pose risk of increased bleeding if you are taking it with anti-clotting drugs.

People should discuss their symptoms with their doctors, and they should tell them about every prescription drug and supplement they're taking.

AL: Do women boomers have any special supplement needs?

Dr. Christenson: For women who are post-menopausal, bone health is critical. They need to have a healthy diet with lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and less meat. Including good sources of calcium like dark leafy greens and sea vegetables is essential.

And they should be taking multivitamins, minerals (especially calcium) and fish oil. They should ask their doctor to add a vitamin D screen to their metabolic profile blood test to determine if they need to take supplemental vitamin D, which helps with calcium absorption.

Direct sunlight converts a chemical in our skin into an active form of vitamin D. But even in Hawaii, where we have a lot of sun, studies show that people are still lacking vitamin D because we use too much sunscreen, and because people tend to stay indoors or at home watching TV.

Overexposure to sun is not healthy. Tanning lamps can bring overexposure and can put people at high risk for skin cancer. But for most people, about 15 minutes a day of sun exposure is healthful and promotes conversion of vitamin D.

AL: As a holistic doctor, what advice would you give about supplements and health?

Dr. Christenson: Be well educated about supplements and use those that come from reputable sources and doctors. Don't think that if you eat well and take nutritional supplements, that means you don't have to exercise, you can continue to smoke, and you can continue to be angry. This thinking is a roadblock to optimal health.

As a holistic doctor I promote a healthy lifestyle in body, mind and spirit. Supplements are just "supplemental": They cannot replace a nutritious diet and a healthy lifestyle. You have to build your health on a foundation of clean air, nutritious foods, daily enjoyable exercise, proper rest, healthy relationships with yourself and others, and a meaningful life.

There is an old saying, "If the body is sick, the mind worries and spirit grieves. If the mind is sick, the body and spirit will suffer from its confusion. If the spirit is sick, there will be no will to care for body and mind."

So, to build that foundation of health, first, eat healthy—lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and less meat. Eat a variety of colorful foods for maximum nutrition, make your plate colorful.

Two, if you smoke, I would ask you to quit. Many people have emotional issues linked with smoking—I and other health care professionals can help you to release them.

Three, control your weight. You can achieve that with a healthy diet and exercise. Weight control is basically a caloric balance: You need to take in fewer calories than you burn.

For exercise, people should find exercise they enjoy, and develop a routine. If you like jogging, do it with a smile, don't just do it as a chore. Or try swimming, hiking, bicycling, going to the gym, dancing, tai chi, qigong, yoga—these are all very good exercises that people should do at least 30 minutes each day.

Four, manage your stress. Modern life stress can make you more vulnerable to health problems.

Many women have issues relating to emotional trauma from their past. Even if it seems small to others, this can affect their self-esteem and block their energy channels. It is important not to ignore these hidden issues. Learn new coping skills with professional counseling.

We have self-healing techniques involving tai chi, qigong and meditation. People can also try complementary and alternative therapies such as music therapy (singing), art or dance therapy, yoga, herbal therapy, aromatherapy, massage, biofeedback and acupuncture. All of these can help people get out of their patterns of stress.

Relationship problems can also cause obstructions and increase stress, and this can lead to illness. Spirituality begins with your relationship with yourself, is nurtured by your relationships with others and culminates in a sense of purpose in life. There are techniques to learn love, peace, forgiveness, inner peace, harmony.

If people have these skills, they will know better how to take care of themselves, including how to choose food, and how to choose supplements. They will know how to make better choices for themselves.

Finally, everybody should have a doctor they trust. They should see their doctor not only when they're not well, but also very importantly for periodic checkups to maintain wellness.