

Whole or Synthetic: The Truth Behind Food Supplements

By Daniel H. Chong, ND

Americans are now spending more than \$17 billion a year on supplements for health and wellness. Strangely enough, the rates of some forms of chronic disease have not changed, while the rates of others have actually increased. There are a number of reasons for these poor statistics and many things remain a mystery.

One thing seems fairly clear, however. Most supplements aren't helping very much.

I'm not saying there are no helpful supplements out there. There certainly are. What is becoming more apparent, however, is supplements will not help much if one does not first address the necessary basics of health and healing.

What is also clear is that not all supplements are created equal. The basics of health and healing were discussed in another of my articles, *The Six Foundations of Healing*. I believe these areas must be addressed for true healing to occur in any chronic disease. In this article, I will discuss some things you should consider if you need to or want to take some supplements. Specifically, I will address the differences between whole foods versus synthetic or isolated nutritional supplements.

Whole Food Nutrients vs. Synthetic, Isolated Nutrients

Most people who read the eHealthy News You Can Use newsletter are at least somewhat familiar with the idea that whole foods are better for you than refined foods. Although there are numerous viewpoints on what kind of foods we should or should not be eating, as well as the ideal ratio of these foods, everyone from all corners of the diet and nutrition world seems to agree on one thing: No matter which foods we choose and in what ratios we eat them, whole foods are better for you than refined foods.

This fact has never really been argued. Everyone agrees raw honey is better for you than white sugar or that brown rice is better for you than white rice. Why should it be any different for vitamins?

Often, I have been puzzled by the average naturopath or nutritionist who goes on and on about the value of whole foods and how refined foods—having been robbed of all the extra nutrients they naturally come with—are not healthy for you. Then, they go on to

prescribe a shopping bag full of isolated, refined vitamins for you to take!

Just like refined foods, these refined vitamins have been robbed of all of the extra accessory nutrients that they naturally come with as well. In turn, like refined foods, they can create numerous problems and imbalances in your body if taken at high levels for long periods of time. They can also act more like drugs in your body, forcing themselves down one pathway or another. At the very least, they won't help you as much as high quality food and food-based supplements

Whole Food Supplements

Whole food supplements are what their name suggests: Supplements made from concentrated whole foods. The vitamins found within these supplements are not isolated. They are highly complex structures that combine a variety of enzymes, coenzymes, antioxidants, trace elements, activators and many other unknown or undiscovered factors all working together synergistically, to enable this vitamin complex to do its job in your body.

Nutrients from within this complex cannot be taken apart or isolated from the whole, and then be expected to do the same job in the body as the whole complex is designed to do.

The perfect example of this difference can be seen in an automobile. An automobile is a wonderfully designed complex machine that needs all of its parts to be present and in place to function properly. Wheels are certainly an important part of the whole, but you could never isolate them from the rest of the car, call them a car or expect them to function like a car. They need the engine, body and everything else.

The same analogy applies to the vitamin C (ascorbic acid) or vitamin E (delta tocopherol) you can find on most health food store shelves. They are parts of an entire complex that serve a purpose when part of the whole. However, they cannot do the job of the entire complex by themselves.

With similar logic in place, one can analyze what a typical multivitamin truly is. The automobile equivalent of creating a multivitamin would be going to a junk yard, finding all of the separate parts you would need to make up an entire automobile, throwing them together in a heap (or capsule in terms of the multivitamin) and expecting that heap to drive like a car!

Obviously, there is a difference. Science cannot create life. Only life can create life.

Synthetic or Isolated Nutritional Supplements

Isolated nutrients or synthetic nutrients are not natural, in that they are never found by themselves in nature. Taking these isolated nutrients, especially at the ultra-high doses found in formulas today, is more like taking a drug. Studies show the body treats these isolated and synthetic nutrients like xenobiotics (foreign substances).

By the same token, food-based supplements are never treated like this by your body. For example, your urine will never turn fluorescent yellow, no matter how much meat (a good source of B vitamins) you eat. This sort of rapid excretion happens only with foreign substances in your body.

Not only are isolated nutrients treated like drugs or other chemicals by your body. Like drugs, they can create problems for you too. Nature does not produce any nutrient in an isolated form. The nutrients in foods are blended together in a specific way and work best in that format. For an isolated nutrient to work properly in the body, it needs all the other parts that are naturally present in the food too.

If the parts are not all there from the start, they are taken from the body's stored supply. This is why isolated nutrients often work for a little while, then seem to stop working. Once your body's store of the extra nutrients is used up, the isolated nutrient you're taking doesn't work as well anymore. Worse yet, a deficiency in these extra nutrients can be created in your body.

And, because most nutrients are isolated from the foods they come in -- using a wide array of potentially nasty solvents and other chemicals -- taking high amounts of these products can also expose you to these potentially toxic chemicals, if care is not taken to remove them. With the burden we are already facing from the high number of chemicals in our environment, why would anyone want to add more?

Synergy and Potency

The various parts of a natural vitamin complex work together in a synergistic manner. Synergy means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Nutritionist Judith DeCava puts it best: "Separating the group of compounds (in a vitamin complex) converts it from a physiological, biochemical, active micronutrient into a disabled, debilitated chemical of little or no value to living cells. The synergy is gone."

In other words, the automobile, in its original form, will drive better than a pile of its individual parts.

Most people don't follow this logic when examining a nutritional supplement.

Supplement makers typically try to stuff as much as possible in a capsule, telling us that the more we take, the better it is for us. This is simply not the case. As you now know, it is not necessarily the amount of a nutrient you ingest that is important, but its form and how much is bioavailable that counts the most. In fact, remembering that ingesting single nutrients can actually create imbalances in the body, logic would dictate the higher the level of a single nutrient that you take in, the quicker this imbalance will occur.

What all of this means: The potency of a supplement has much more to do with synergy than with actual nutrient levels. It is a combined effect of all the parts of the food, rather than the chemical effect of a single part, that is most important.