

Multivitamin Use Linked To Increased Breast Cancer Risk

A Swedish study released in April 2010 ("*Multivitamin use and breast cancer incidence in a prospective cohort of Swedish women.*" Susanna C Larsson, Agneta Åkesson, Leif Bergkvist, and Alicja Wolk. *Am J Clin Nutr.* Published online 24 March 2010), found that multivitamin use was associated with an increased risk of breast cancer. Researchers in Sweden who studied data on over 35,000 middle aged and older women followed for 10 years found a link between taking multivitamins and increased risk of breast cancer and said this was of concern to public health and should be investigated further.

You can read about the study, conducted at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden, online in the 24 March issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. (<http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/short/ajcn.2009.28837v1>)

People concerned about these findings should note that they do not prove that multivitamin use *caused* the women's breast cancer. The study was prospective, which means that it can only identify whether there was a link or not and try and rule out other possible influences. The study was not a randomized-controlled clinical trial but was undertaken by women filling in questionnaires about their use of multivitamins and breast cancer risk factors. The brand of multi-vitamin used was not examined which could further influence the results as it is not possible to examine other factors such as manufacturing processes or excipients used. It is also important to note that Swedish dietary supplements are not regulated to the same standards as those in Australia.

Other studies do not share the same findings as this recent study. In February 2009, the *Archives of Internal Medicine* published details of a large US study examining over 160,000 postmenopausal women that found no convincing evidence that long term use of multivitamins changed their risk of developing any of the common cancers, cardiovascular disease or dying prematurely.

The Head of Surgical Oncology at Newcastle's Calvary Mater Hospital, Professor John Forbes, says that studies into the benefits of vitamin D are far more compelling. Professor Forbes believes that the results of the Swedish study are barely statistically significant and do not indicate what the outcome might be for women taking fewer vitamin tablets.

"A far more reliable paper [was] in fact published late last year from the very well-established Women's Health Initiative in America, where they studied something similar and could find no evidence that any vitamin impacted on the risk of breast cancer, except possibly that vitamin D lowers risk.

I would not think that women should suddenly stop taking things that they are taking. The bottom line is this is not convincing evidence at all for anyone to change their dietary habits at present. The vitamin D data is much clearer." Said Professor Forbes (ABC News online, 19 April 2010).

The findings of this study are not conclusive, however, it is never advisable to self-administer multivitamins and supplements. Women should feel confident in using multivitamins and supplements prescribed specifically for them by a qualified health practitioner.