



Australian Prescriber



AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW

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JURY STILL OUT ON ANTIOXIDANT SUPPLEMENTS

The idea that antioxidants can offer some protection against ageing and a variety of age-related conditions, including heart disease and cancer, is controversial. To focus on "a narrow range of antioxidant supplements" may be missing the point entirely and even "ill-advised", according to Professor Mark Wahlqvist, reported in the latest issue of *Australian Prescriber*.

Factors including smoking, alcohol and too much fat in the diet can cause the excess production of free radicals. If these outnumber the body's antioxidant stores, they can cause the kind of damage that has been linked to ageing and age-related conditions.

One of the major theories about biological ageing is that it depends on oxidation processes. "For this reason, there is great interest in the antioxidant capacity of the human diet and of nutrient supplements," says Professor Wahlqvist.

Many studies have linked diets containing moderate to high proportions of fruit and vegetables to lower mortality and a reduced risk of developing some health problems, yet "these protective effects are probably due to combinations of nutrients and also to the so-called non-nutritive substances found in foods."

Some believe that if enough of an essential nutrient is good, then more is better, but Professor Wahlqvist makes the point that taking large amounts of antioxidant nutrients can "induce either beneficial or harmful effects." For example, favourable effects of vitamin E have been observed in relation to Alzheimer's disease and prostate cancer, but high doses are also associated with increased risk of death from some cancers.

"The promotion of antioxidants as therapeutic agents is inappropriate when their efficacy is unproven and their toxicology uncertain," says Professor Wahlqvist. "It is much more realistic to envisage claims that eating a wide variety of plant-derived food might be protective against excess oxidant activity."

Further information: Professor Wahlqvist phone (03) 9905 8145

The current issue of *Australian Prescriber* also looks at the unacceptably high rate of medication misadventures in older Australians and provides a fascinating history of the hypodermic needle!

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