

MEDIA RELEASE
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Study claiming multivitamins link to breast cancer is alarmist

Natural Products New Zealand (NPNZ), the industry body representing a significant proportion of New Zealand natural health product manufacturers, says consumers should not be alarmed over media reports of a study claiming a link between multivitamin use and an increased risk of breast cancer.

The Swedish study¹ which collected data by a self-administered questionnaire suggested an association between the use of multivitamins and an increased risk of breast cancer.

NPNZ questions the validity of the study and believes consumers should not stop taking multivitamins.

Michelle Palmer, executive director of NPNZ says the Swedish survey of 35,000 women is not conclusive and contains several limitations.

“The fact that the whole study is based on a self-administered questionnaire means there is a high possibility of difficulty in accurately recalling details and errors in classification by the researchers leading to skewed results,” says Ms Palmer.

“There are no details on types of multivitamins provided for this study and the researchers were not able to identify the components of multivitamins that may be responsible for the possible association.

“There are many more robust studies whose findings do not support this claim.”

The Women’s Health Initiative² which followed over 68,000 women for eight years showed there was no association of multivitamin use and the risk of cancer.

A population based study published in 2009 found no association between multivitamin use and breast cancer.³

¹ Larsson et al. Multivitamin use and breast cancer incidence in a prospective cohort of Swedish women. March 24:10.3945/ajcn.2009.28837.

² Neuhouser ML, Wassertheil-Smoller S, Thompson C, et al. Multivitamin use and risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease in the Women’s Health Initiative cohorts. Archives of Internal Medicine 2009; 169:294-304.

³ Meulepas JM, Newcomb PA, Burnett-Hartman AN, et al. Multivitamin supplement use and risk of invasive breast cancer. Public Health Nutrition 2009; Dec3:1-6.

In another study involving over 37,000 women with an average of 10 years follow up, the results show that multivitamin use was not associated with the overall risk of breast cancer.⁴

Medical researcher, Professor Shaun Holt, says the findings of the Swedish study are inconclusive and conflict with other multivitamin studies.

“More detailed and substantial information is needed before any association can be made between taking multivitamins and an increased risk of breast cancer. It is likely that the combination of various factors such as unhealthy lifestyle and individual predisposition put the women at increased risk to cancer.

“Multivitamins can complement our diet which is often imbalanced in nutrition. In view of the substantial scientific support for the use of multivitamins as part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, there is no reason people who take multivitamin supplements should not continue to do so,” concluded Prof. Holt.

ENDS

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⁴ Ishitani K, Lin J, Manson JE, et al. A prospective study of multivitamin supplement use and risk of breast cancer. Am J Epidemiol. 2008; 167: 1197-206.