

Supplement trend provides little benefit for young children

April 4 2014, by Anika Rodgers



Dr Binns says a well balanced diet is more beneficial than using supplements for young children. Credit: Alpha

A healthy diet is far more effective in supporting the growth and development of pre-school children than dietary supplements, according to research which suggests supplements aren't being absorbed by children under five-years-old.

The research also found increased [dietary supplement](#) use by children in Australia was linked to mothers having a higher education, never having breastfed, and the presence of advertising.

Curtin University Professor of Public Health Colin Binns says mothers are being led by advertising and are being convinced that supplements are the answer.

"The universal thing that you notice when you do a study is that all mothers want to do the best for their children. That's why they give their children supplements but in reality they would be better off spending the money on better quality food instead," Dr Binns says.

"If you have a healthy diet as a child then two things happen, first of all you continue to have a [healthy diet](#) throughout your life and secondly your body is programmed to be healthy and you have much lower rates of diseases."

The research was prompted by an increasing use of dietary supplements, especially in China.

It compared Chinese pre-school children from Western Australia and China to understand the prevalence of dietary supplementation use and the associated health benefits.

Two hundred and thirty-seven Chinese mothers from Perth with pre-school children under five-years-old and 2079 mothers from Chengdu and Wuhan in China were surveyed.

The [mothers](#) from Perth were monitored over 12 months from 2010-11.

Of the children surveyed a total of 22.6 per cent in Australia and 32.4 per cent in China were taking supplements.

"What was interesting in China is there was an emphasis on calcium [58.5 per cent] and zinc [40.4 per cent]," Dr Binns says.

"In Australia it was multivitamins/minerals [46.2 per cent] and fish oil [42.3 per cent].

"Generally the [supplements](#) are not needed. It is much better to eat two fruits, five vegetables and have a bit of fish everyday; and have a glass of milk than to try and have a synthetic capsule."

He says the research collaborators in China noticed nutrients obtained by infants from breastfeeding helped with overall development and prevented some health problems.

"Babies from China who are breastfed have fewer admissions to hospital and have fewer health episodes such as pneumonia," he says.

Dr Binns says where possible it is advisable to achieve adequate nutrient intake from a varied wholesome diet.

More information: "Prevalence of dietary supplement use in healthy pre-school Chinese children in Australia and China." Chen S, et al. *Nutrients*, 2014 Feb 21;6(2):815-28. [DOI: 10.3390/nu6020815](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu6020815).

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