

Dietary supplements are a waste of money for most seeking to avoid dementia, experts say

June 17 2019, by Cathie Anderson



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Sales of purported brain-health supplements such as fish oil and jellyfish are expected to reach \$5.8 billion by 2023, but in a report released

recently, an AARP panel of brain experts called them a huge waste of money for healthy seniors seeking to avoid or reverse dementia.

"The market is so large they get by without rigorous documentation of the efficacy of their products," says neurologist Ronald Petersen, director of the Mayo Clinic Alzheimer's Disease Research Center in Rochester, Minn. He and other members of the Global Council on Brain Health do not recommend any [dietary supplements](#) to prevent, slow or reverse [cognitive decline](#).

The authors of the report do recommend further study of supplement use for individuals who have vitamin deficiencies, said Dr. John Olichney, a neurologist who co-leads the UC Davis Health's Alzheimer's Disease Center, and that's exactly what his team is doing when it comes to vitamin D. He said the preliminary UCD research has shown "some tantalizing associations with cognitive decline," enough evidence that they have embarked on a randomized clinical trial.

When it comes to healthy subjects, though, Olichney also is concerned that the search for a magic pill that will prevent dementia is leading people to do things that compromise their health.

"Supplements ... are being taken largely without the endorsement or prescription of a doctor," he said. "There's a lot of unnecessary spending, and there's also unnecessary confidence that if you take supplements, you can prevent dementia, and there aren't high-quality randomized clinical trials showing that prevention effect empirically."

Most people would be better off ensuring that they are getting a balanced, natural food diet rather than manmade supplementation, he said, because people taking supplements may think they're inoculated from a problem when in fact they're making a negative trade-off.

While some seniors with nutritional deficiencies may well benefit from the use of supplements, Olichney said, they are in the minority. It's important, he said, that seniors see their [primary care physicians](#) and get the blood tests that will reveal whether they need supplements and employ science to ensure they have adequate vitamin levels.

Rather than taking would-be memory enhancers, the Global Council on Brain Health recommended that seniors—and indeed everyone—take other steps to keep their brains sharp.

They stressed in a 2018 report that the all-too-common Western diet (high in salt, sugar, excess calories and saturated fats) leads to high blood pressure, diabetes and other conditions that not only sabotage heart health but also undermine cognitive function.

The report guidelines are extensive, but in general, they state that if people want to nourish the brain, they should adopt healthy diets such as the Mediterranean diet; the DASH diet, more formally known as Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension; the Nordic diet; or the MIND diet, a combination of the Mediterranean and DASH diets.

The council also have released reports explaining why sleep, [physical activity](#) and mentally stimulating pursuits are also crucial to brain health. The physicians on the council have urged seniors to embrace mentally stimulating pursuits such as taking classes in dance, photography or a new language; practicing yoga; gardening; or volunteering.

Teresa Koch, who coordinates volunteers in Placer County's Senior Peer Counseling Program, said seniors struggle with diversifying their activities for a number of reasons: Some are new to the Placer, Calif., area or their financial situation has changed after the death of a spouse, or many of the people in their [peer group](#) have moved away or died.

"We offer ... free peer support for age-related adjustment issues," Koch said, "so for people in the county who are experiencing things like grief and loss, situational depression, situational anxiety, change in living situation, health diagnosis, [financial situation](#), family conflict, caregiver stress ... we are there to support them and allow them to have someone to talk to about it who can relate, and try to get them connected to services that they may not be aware are available in our county."

Placer County's peer counselors do many things: They do online research to help seniors find classes in subjects they love. They make them aware of ride services such as GoGoGrandparent.com, Lyft and Uber, so they can get back and forth to classes if they can't drive. They suggest ways they can expand their friendship circle.

Many other counties, including Yolo, El Dorado and Sacramento, offer similar services, and seniors can also call upon the Area 4 Agency on Aging to find other resources. Koch said that she also encourages seniors to seek help from receptionists in the buildings where they live.

"A good number of our clients know how to use the internet or have access, but there are still a significant amount that either never learned or never wanted to learn or just plain couldn't afford it and don't have a computer," she said. "There is a lack of connection for many people, even they want to do things. They don't know how to find it, now that there isn't a phone book."

AARP's researchers urged seniors to seek out challenging new activities that will develop new skills and introduce them to a wider social circle. Rather than limiting yourself because of your age, the doctors said, consider your attitude toward life because that will influence whether you're willing to look for ways to overcome physical limitations.

The Global Council on Brain Health is an independent group of

scientists, doctors, scholars and policy experts from all over the world brought together by AARP.

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Citation: Dietary supplements are a waste of money for most seeking to avoid dementia, experts say (2019, June 17) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-06-dietary-supplements-money-dementia-experts.html>

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