

## Widespread Ignorance of Regulation and Labeling of Vitamins, Minerals and Food Supplements

*Large majorities of the public highly skeptical of “anti-aging medicine” but believe that healthy lifestyle and good nutrition help to slow the aging process*

This issue of Harris Interactive Health Care News is based on a nationwide survey “Anti-Aging Medicine, Vitamins, Minerals and Food Supplements,” conducted for the International Longevity Center.

The survey was based on 1,010 telephone interviews with a nationwide cross section of adults surveyed in October 2002.

Dr. Robert Butler, the president and CEO of the International Longevity Center, comments, “It is alarming that so many people believe that the government regulates the labeling and claims made for vitamins, minerals and food supplements when it does not do so.”

### Beliefs About Government Regulation, Labeling, And Safety

Most people are misinformed about the extent of government regulation of vitamins, minerals and food supplements. They believe that supplements must be approved by a government agency such as the FDA, that the manufacturers are not allowed to make claims for their safety and effectiveness unless there is solid scientific evidence to support them, and that they are required to include warnings about potential side effects or danger.

**TABLE 1**

### Beliefs About Vitamins, Minerals and Food Supplements

“I will read you some statements about vitamins, minerals and other food supplements which are available in supermarkets, pharmacies and health food stores. Please say, for each one, if you think it is true or false.”

	Total	Education			
		H.S. or Less	Some College	College Grad	Post Grad
	%	%	%	%	%
The government requires that their labels include warnings about potential side effects or dangers	68	77	64	56	46
They must be approved by a government agency like the Food and Drug Administration, which approves pharmaceutical products—before they can be sold to the public	59	70	57	41	31
Manufacturers of these products are not allowed to make claims for their safety unless there is solid scientific evidence to support them	55	60	56	47	39
Because these are natural substances, they are safe	13	17	13	10	4

Base: All Adults

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However, relatively few people believe that because supplements are natural substances, they are safe.

There are very big differences between the beliefs of people with more and less education. The more educated people are, the less likely they are to be misinformed about the extent of government regulation and labeling. However, substantial minorities even of those with postgraduate education are still misinformed.

### Awareness of, and Attitudes Toward, Anti-aging Medicine

Just over half (55%) of the public says they have seen, heard or read something about the “anti-aging medicine.” However, the overwhelming majority (90%) does not believe that taking medication, vitamin, mineral and food supplements can prevent people who are generally healthy from growing old. Nevertheless, the seven percent (7%) who do believe this represents some 15 million people who are potential victims of the claims of anti-aging medicine.

**TABLE 2**  
**Seen, Heard, Read About “Anti-aging Medicine”**

“Have you seen, heard or read anything about what is called “anti-aging medicine?”

	Total	Education			
		H.S. or Less	Some College	College Grad	Post Grad
	%	%	%	%	%
Have seen, heard or read	55	49	56	67	68
Have not seen, heard or read	44	51	43	32	30
Not sure	*	*	1	*	2

Base: All Adults

\*= Less than 0.5%

**TABLE 3**  
**Will medications, vitamins, minerals and food supplements prevent people from growing old?**

“Do you think that taking medications, vitamins, or food supplements will prevent people, who are generally healthy, from growing old?”

	Total
	%
Yes, will prevent	7
Will not prevent	90
Not sure	2

Base: All Adults

**TABLE 4**

**Can aging be stopped?**

“Some health advocates say that the aging process can be stopped. Do you believe this is true or false?”

	Total
	%
True	5
False	94
Not sure	1

Base: All Adults

**TABLE 5**

**Tend to Believe Claims About Anti-aging Medicines on TV**

“Do you generally tend to believe or not believe the claims about anti-aging medicines that are often made in paid programming and advertisements on television?”

	Total
	%
Believe	4
Not believe	94
Not sure	2

Base: All Adults

**TABLE 6**

**How Much Various Behaviors Help People From Growing Old**

“How much do you think each of the following help people, who are generally healthy, from growing old – a lot, some, not much or not at all?”

	A Lot	Some	Not Much	Not At All	Not Sure
	%	%	%	%	%
Regular exercise	75	17	1	6	*
Not smoking	73	11	2	11	1
Eating plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables	68	24	1	6	*
Not being overweight	66	19	3	11	1
Having close relationships with friends and family members	64	24	2	9	1
Eating a low fat diet	49	35	6	8	1
Vitamin supplements	23	55	10	11	1
Mineral supplements	13	53	14	15	5
Herbs and herbal supplements	12	46	18	20	4
Hormone or Estrogen Replacement Therapy or HRT for women	10	43	14	19	13
Drinking alcohol in moderation	11	31	19	38	1
Hormonal therapies such as Growth, Testosterone or DHEA	5	30	21	28	16

Base: All adults

\*= Less than 0.5%

## Behaviors That May Help to Keep People from Growing Old

Table 6 provides a detailed look at the beliefs of the public concerning how various behaviors affect the aging process. In general, most people are rather well informed. Substantial majorities believe that regular exercise, not smoking, eating plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, not being overweight and having close relationships with friends and family members help people “a lot” from growing old.

## Consumption of Vitamins, Minerals and Food Supplements

Seven out of every ten adults (69%) take some vitamins, minerals or food supplement products. The median number of vitamins, minerals or food supplements taken every month is 30 (i.e., one per day). The older people are, the more likely they are to take some vitamins, mineral or food supplement. Women are slightly more likely than men to take them.

While more educated people are more skeptical of the claims made about these products (Table 1) they are slightly more likely to consume them than are people with less education.

**TABLE 7**  
**Ever Take Vitamins, Minerals and Food Supplements**

“Do you ever take any vitamins, minerals or food supplements?”

	Total	Education			
		H.S. or Less	Some College	College Grad	Post Grad
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, take vitamins, minerals or food supplements	69	65	74	72	78
No, do not	30	35	25	28	22
Not sure	*	–	*	*	–
<b>Median Number of pills, vitamins, etc. taken in last 30 days</b>	30	32	29	33	34

Base: All Adults

\* = Less than 0.5%

– = No response

## Methodology

This survey was conducted by telephone within the United States between October 15 and 21, 2002 among a nationwide cross section of 1,010 adults (ages 18+). Figures for age, sex, race, education, number of adults and number of voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to align them with their actual proportions in the population.

In theory, with a probability sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

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