

One, two or three a day: experts disagree

By Julie Bird

The human body needs vitamins to function properly.

No one will argue that fact, but there is violent disagreement on how to get those vitamins, the amounts of each vitamin the body needs and the value of extra vitamins.

Shaklee Corporation, a national health and beauty aid supplier, offers several vitamin tablets called food supplements, along with a multiple vitamin supplement.

"Most people don't eat or don't have a chance to eat properly," said Earl Bates, Shaklee coordinator. "And often what they do eat has been manufactured, like instant potatoes. The tablets are not to replace food, but to supplement it."

Some people take huge amounts of one vitamin. Others take multiple vitamins. How does a person know how much to take, if any?

"It's hard to tell what people need," Bates said. "People usually experiment with different amounts to see what makes them feel better."

That type of experimentation could be dangerous according to Dr. Richard Hammer, doctor at the University Health Center.

"I would think that it would be a little bit hazardous

to tell someone just to go buy the vitamins you think you need," he said.

"ORDINARILY, people do not know what they're doing," he said. "They're not objective. The easy way is to latch onto an author's emphasis of a certain vitamin to cure their problem."

Doctors, nutritionists and consumers can't seem to agree on the benefits or disadvantages of taking vitamins, especially in large doses.

Most doctors say a person with a well-balanced diet should not need extra vitamins, not even a multiple vitamin tablet.

But, Bates said, doctors often have had little training in nutrition. When patients ask them for nutritional advice, the doctors' advice is to eat well.

"That would be fine if you knew for sure what you were getting in your meals," Bates said. Foods bought in the supermarket often are processed to the point that they lose many of their original vitamins, he said.

Dr. Don Waltemath, an internal medicine specialist, agrees that doctors lack training in nutrition.

"In years past, the medical world didn't think in terms of Americans being undernourished, so we just read our nutrition information to pass the test," Waltemath said.

"There has been renewed vigor at medical meetings in the past two or three years, with more emphasis placed on nutrition and recognizing that people don't always eat right," he said.

VITAMINS A and D have been found to be dangerous in excessive doses, he said, because the body can't easily eliminate them.

Symptoms of Vitamin A overdose include nausea, dizziness, muscular aches, dry, peeling skin, sore, red eyes, and in some cases, an enlarged liver.

A Vitamin D overdose is more serious and can involve vomiting, dehydration, kidney stones or kidney failure.

"Fortunately, D is not one of the ones the faddists are pumping," Waltemath said.

Most people won't get into trouble by taking vitamins, he said, and people who limit their diets might be wise to take a multiple vitamin.

Unfortunately, some people try to treat themselves with vitamins rather than going to a doctor, Waltemath said. This is most often true in cancer cases.

Laetrile, a drug thought by many to be a cancer cure, also is known as Vitamin B-17.

"If a patient depends on the nutritional approach, he may avoid chemotherapy. He may wait too long, and we will miss making headway," he said.

Current fad vitamins are C and E, the doctors said.

"It is not documented that Vitamin C will help prevent colds," Waltemath said. "Large doses could possibly cause upset stomachs because of the ascorbic acid. I would say to stick with a glass of orange juice a day."

VITAMIN E could be dangerous to patients with high blood pressure or rheumatic heart disease, according to the book "Know Your Nutrition" by Linda Clark.

Marla Thompson, a sophomore secondary education major from Mission, Kan., said she takes vitamins, including a multiple vitamin, Vitamin C, desiccated liver tablets, ginseng and a B complex tablet, she said.

She said the Vitamin B she takes at noon to give her energy later in the afternoon, and if she took it with the multiple vitamin, which already contains Vitamin B, it would be flushed from her system.

Thompson limits her intake of fried foods and red meats, so she takes the liver pills for protein, she said.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't noticed any change in myself," she said. "And I still get colds. I'll probably always take the multiple vitamin, but I don't know about the others."

Hammer said most people take vitamins because they are guilty of not eating proper foods.

"While students don't usually eat a traditional, well-balanced diet, most of them get some of each food group," he said. "If you live in the dorm you almost have to go out of your way not to get a well-balanced diet."

"Most students who don't feel well are tired, bored and depressed, rather than having a vitamin deficiency," he said. "I think people are wasting their money if they are eating a well-balanced diet and taking a multiple vitamin 'to be sure.'"

"If the drug companies depended on physicians to prescribe vitamins that were really needed, they'd go under," he said.

