

Send vitamins B-A-C-K

Study finds supplements may not bring the advantages we thought

By Erin Hanafy

What exquisite hell it is to plan your health regimen around the latest findings of scientific studies. Just as soon as you have incorporated the newest “super food” into your life (Green tea! Greek yogurt!), here comes another study saying there’s another food you really need (Kale! Sprouts!).

But a study released last month was exceptionally surprising, even to the information-overloaded Whole Foods set. An Iowa Women’s Health Study tracked 38,000 women age 55 and older since the mid-1980s and found that most nutritional supplements had no effect when it came to reducing the risk of death. And in the case of vitamin B6, folic acid, magnesium, zinc, copper, iron and multivitamins, supplements actually were linked to an increased risk of death.

All that time spent perusing the gleaming aisles of health food stores for nothing? The Googling, the comparison shopping, the timed pill-popping? And the money — for God’s sake, the money! The news was baffling to those of us who grew up taking Flintstones multivitamins, and who associate health — and health food

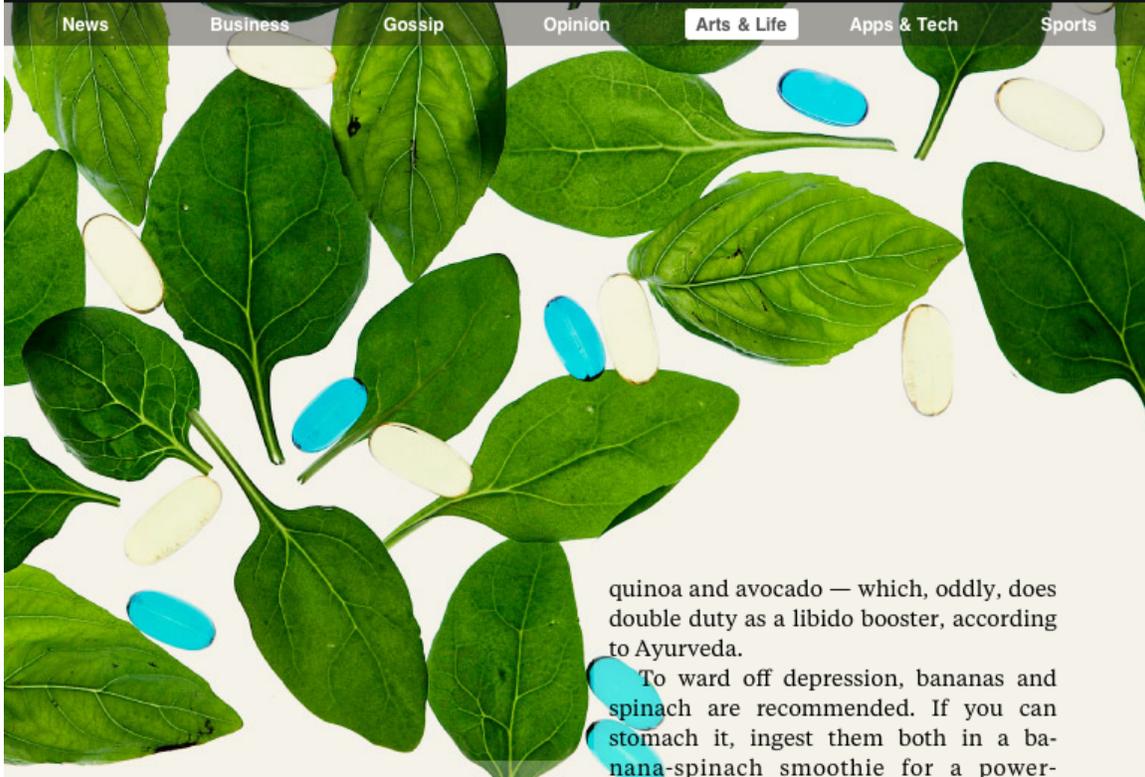
stores — with rows and rows of pill jars.

But practitioners of Ayurveda, a traditional medical system from India, were not surprised. Ayurveda rejects the “active ingredient” approach — which takes vitamin C out of an orange and puts it in a tablet, for instance — as wrong-headed and oversimplified.

“Foods are so complex, offering not only vitamins and minerals, but fiber, nutrients — carbohydrates, proteins and fats — phytochemicals and a whole host of nutritious substances,” said Naina Marballi, a New York City Ayurvedic physician and educator who first practiced in India for 20 years.

“The fallacy of the active ingredient” is a foundational principle of Ayurvedic medicine, according to Jay Glaser, one of





the first Western physicians to study Ayurvedic medicine in India, practicing alongside Deepak Chopra — back when he was just a doctor.

“If you try to isolate the active principle from the whole, you lose the benefit and you risk developing side effects,” Glaser writes in his book “Body Renewal: The Lost Art of Self-Repair.”

In other words, eat the orange and skip the vitamin C tablet.

And instead of buying expensive probiotic supplements, Ayurveda would advise you to add more okra to your diet. The vegetable promotes the growth of non-pathogenic bacteria in the gut, the so-called “good bacteria” touted for their ability to improve digestion and bowel function.

Other probiotic foods include yogurt,

quinoa and avocado — which, oddly, does double duty as a libido booster, according to Ayurveda.

To ward off depression, bananas and spinach are recommended. If you can stomach it, ingest them both in a banana-spinach smoothie for a power-packed mood elevator.

Perhaps the most prized food in Ayurveda, though, is basil. Drinking basil tea is reputed to bring blood pressure into balance — whether you’re high or low — and chewing basil leaves several times a day is prescribed as a cure for bad breath. But its biggest selling point is its effectiveness in keeping the digestive system running smoothly and efficiently.

“That’s why in Italy they can eat so much cheese — it is paired with basil, so it won’t weigh you down as much,” Marballi said.

With Ayurveda, there are no miracle pills. But there are innumerable miracle foods. So bring on the kale, the sprouts, the yogurt — and wash it all down with green tea. And what the hell, grab a slice of pizza — with fresh basil on top, of course.





In Ayurveda, nutrition is determined by what you eat and how you digest. A perfect diet is wasted on a body that is not efficiently absorbing nutrients – so the “what you eat” part is only one out of the four elements of nutrition:

DIET

The focus is on freshly prepared meals with lots of vegetables and fruits — and customized according to each individual’s physiology (called a dosha).



YOGA

Yoga poses (called asanas) are reputed to improve digestive and metabolic function by increasing blood flow to specific areas of the body.



BREATHING

In Ayurveda, breathing exercises are prescribed to treat a number of stress-related disorders.



MEDITATION

This is where you can get your “Om” on. To counteract the effects of stress, Ayurvedic meditation practices aim to improve mental and emotional resiliency.



