Katie Caviness-Crolley 0:08

Welcome to medicine made general, where real doctors breakdown real health issues. Whether it's a simple question or a complex concern, we're here to help you take charge of your health with confidence in each of these short info packed episodes, we tackle trending and often confusing medical topics giving.
You exactly what you need to know.
No jargon, just clarity.
I'm your host, Katie Caviness-Crolley, communications specialist for the Johns Hopkins Division of General Internal Medicine. And today we're joined by Doctor Bimal Ashar, the D. William Schlott Professor of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.
He also serves as the interim director of GIM and is a dietary supplement expert here to talk about, well, you guessed it, dietary supplements.
Welcome Doctor Asher.

Bimal Ashar 0:57

Thank you, Katie.
It's very nice to be here.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 0:58

It's great to have you.
Oh, it's great to have you.
Let's go ahead and get started.
Research shows more than half of adults over the age of 20 take dietary supplements, and more than 80% of women over the age of 60 take them.
Do these groups really need them?

Bimal Ashar 1:15

So that's a great question because yes, so many people take them the the general, my general answer on this is that if your diet is well balanced, you probably don't get a whole lot out of dietary supplements. And there've been a number of studies to really show this.
That we should really be trying to get our nutrients from food and not from pills.
And you know, yes, there are going to be certain situations where.
A dietary supplement may be appropriate. For instance, if you've got osteoporosis

and you need to take a little bit of calcium and vitamin D or something like that, it makes sense.
But a lot of the herbs and and other substances that people are taking, there's very little, if any data that it really does a whole lot for people.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 2:06
So it sounds like there's some misconceptions out there.
What would you say are some other common misconceptions about taking supplements?

Bimal Ashar 2:13
Yeah, I think you know, when you think about why people take supplements, right?
Some of think they're gonna they want to live longer.
And or they want to try to prevent illness.
Or they wanna?
Or they're actually taking it to treat something, right. And that's, that's where there's probably more data, or at least more studies done because it's easier to do that way.
Or they're gonna make, like I said, if your diet's poor, you, what do you wanna do?
Well, I'm gonna take a multivitamin because I know my diet's poor.
Right to make up for something they're not doing.
Or, you know, some people take supplements, you know to.
To make up for something that they're doing to themselves and I'll give you an example of that.
It's, you know, I've had a patient who for years insists on drinking a case of beer every weekend.
And even though he realizes that, hey, it's probably not good for my liver.
So he takes milk Thistle, a liver supplement to try to protect his liver.
Right, so he's causing the insult, but he's trying to protect himself by taking supplements. And there's really no data that that's going to do anything for him.
So.
So that's really kind of why people take solids and and so.
And and part of the issue right is that that if you think about?
Medicine in general, right?
We we have not done a great job about getting preventive medications for people to to help them live longer and.

Really do a whole lot about preventing disease.
And so people are turning to whatever they can find, and that's over the counter so.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 3:59
Well, I think that helps. Helps us understand why supplements have become so popular.
Going to prescription medications really quick. Unlike prescription medications, supplements do not require FDA approval before hitting the market.
What can you explain what that means for consumers?

Bimal Ashar 4:17
Yeah. And I think your point is a very, very critical one and that is, you know, people often times think that because it's sold in your local pharmacy that it's something that's been approved, right?
And we think about drugs, even though the over-the-counter drugs, right?
They've all gone or gone. Testing and approval through the Food and Drug Administration, the way that dietary supplements work and and this.
Came out of the dietary supplement health and Education Act.
Of 1994, the way they they, their regulation works is that you can market your dietary supplement without it getting any. Having any data for either effectiveness or safety.
And it's only on the back end when people start complaining.
Or physicians start reporting, or manufacturers report side effects or problems.
Will they potentially be taken off the market?
And so it's a very.
Different thing than taking an over-the-counter drug or a prescription drug because there's been absolutely no pre approval process prior to them being marketed.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 5:29
OK.
So that's for supplements.
What about for multivitamins?
You know, they're very popular.
Do you think they actually make a difference in health, and if so, how?

Bimal Ashar 5:40

Yeah. So, you know similarly, you know, you and I could market a multivitamin. And put it on the market and.
We don't have to show anything, any benefit or anything like that. And and there have been a number of large studies, the physician's health study was one, the Women's Health Initiative was another that.
Where they they had people take a multivitamin for an extended number of years and they really found no reduction in heart disease in heart attacks or.
Strokes or cancer death?
The interesting thing in in the in, I think there's got a lot of a lot of press not too long ago is there was a recent study that was done on multivitamins and brain function.
And suggesting that.
It potentially improves memory.
Now, now the the study has to be interpreted with a little bit of.
Caution because they looked at a recall kind of thing over the phone and.
It may have shown a little bit of a benefit and so do I have a problem with people take a multivitamin.
Do I tell them not to take it if they want to take it?
No, but do I also think that people should get their nutrients through a balanced diet?
I absolutely do.
So yes, so multivitamins may be something with with memory, but there needs to be much more study.
Study done in order to really say that definitively.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 7:17
What about making it more specific rather than a multivitamin?
What about, you know, say vitamin D?
Can are there any studies that show just taking a vitamin specific like vitamin A, vitamin D, something like that, that might would be more effective than a multivitamin?

Bimal Ashar 7:32
Yeah. And so, you know, it's pretty clear that vitamin D has a role in bone health.
And but in and of itself, right?
Yeah, there have been a number of studies done that. If you take vitamin D, you

don't decrease your fracture risk or anything like that.
You know, there's a lot of things.
You know vitamin DA number of years ago was really a hot, hot supplement to take.
And basically because if you look at the normal, what's considered normal and some of the the way that normals are are determined is arbitrary.
But if you look at the normal, most people are deficient, not, you know, have some sort of insufficiency of vitamin D per the normal range now.
Does that mean?
And then then there were a bunch of studies done that says, hey.
Heart disease and lung disease and all these other diseases have been associated with lower vitamin D levels. But the key thing here is that if you start taking vitamin D, do you actually improve those diseases? And studies are coming out now and a number of studies have been.
Done already to really suggest that it has no effect and then there have been some further studies to suggest that people taking really high dose vitamin D may be at higher risk of certain.
Problems like falls, which is odd because originally it was thought that taking 800 I use of vitamin DA day prevents falls, but when they tried higher doses it may have caused falls.
So it's a very, very kind of complicated.
Process and so is there a role for vitamin D?
Absolutely. If you have osteoporosis, if you have problems with your bones, you want to make sure that you are taking some vitamin D you know we do get vitamin D from sunlight.
And we tell people, hey, stay out of the sun, slop on sunscreen, wear a hat.
And so we're telling you not to get vitamin D in essence, when we when we make those recommendations.
So. So maybe taking a little bit of vitamin D is not a bad idea, but is it really proven to do a whole lot for any diseases other than providing a nutrient necessary for the treatment of osteoporosis?
Not, not really.
So yes.
I think that that vitamin D is probably something is it's a reasonable thing to take 'cause most of us don't get much and but it's not nothing that's going to change

your health dramatically.
Exactly. So don't expect this this great improvement.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 10:14
OK, moving back to supplements.
There are memory boosting supplements like prevagen.
Can you explain a little bit more about that and do do these supplements like prevagen really work?

Bimal Ashar 10:28
You know, and this goes back to what I what I talked about before is that we can market a supplement without it actually having been proven to be effective or safe.
And if you take a supplement like prevagen, which is advertised as a memory enhancer.
And the the active ingredient is thought to be this appoi corn.
That, and they'll say it was discovered in jellyfish.
And you know, it's a very complicated history here and. And what you find is that.
This is a a lesson in marketing, right?
That they have been very successful very early on and this goes back over 15 years now in marketing as a memory enhancer.
At one point they were actually making claims that it could improve Alzheimer's, dementia, improve memory loss from head trauma.
Actually, way back in 2012, the FDA sent them a letter.
Saying that, hey, you need to cease making these claims because you have no proof of this.
And that also they were suggesting at one point that.
The this should not be considered a supplement.
It's a drug. I mean, we don't have this part of the jellyfish in us, right?
And so it's really should.
Be considered like a drug?
In 2015, there was a class action lawsuit saying that, hey, there's no way that this this active ingredient that they talked about could work since it's actually degraded in the stomach.
And that that, the, the what? And I'll go back to advertising a little bit.
So one of the things that that supplement companies often do is they use the term

clinically.
Proven or doctor recommended, and that's kind of what happened here.
And So what they what they ended up doing with with this company specifically is that they did a study and.
They and they, if you look at the the results of the study actually it was negative for showing that it had a significant effect on memory.
But then they took that and they broke it down into pieces because they did a bunch of different memory tests and they found one or two tests that ended up by chance being positive, even though some of the other ones were actually negative, suggesting that it had a.
Negative effect on other parts of memory, but they ended up highlighting that saying it's clinically proven for memory and so one of the other parts of this is well, why are people?
Gravitating towards this is because this is a big concern for people.
Right. I mean as we get older, we get more and more concerned about forgetting and developing dementia. And so we were looking for something to do. And so you have an audience of people who are just looking for something to help them.
And so when you have something, someone that says, oh, it enhances memory.
Why? You know I have patients who said, well, I'm gonna take it anyway because.
There's nothing else for me, and so people take it. But but when you look at the efficacy, it's not there.
There have been reports of some safety issues, but this goes for a lot of the memory enhancers that are being marketed is that they're really praying on.
The the vulnerability of of people as they get older.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 14:22
Thank you for that answer.
I feel like you've been touching on this for most of the interview. I guess in my final question to you.
Is if someone wants to improve their health, you know, can you give us a summary of better alternatives to take rather than relying solely on vitamins and supplements to get them there?

Bimal Ashar 14:45
Yeah, absolutely.

So if you'll wanna prevent disease.
Work on your diet, OK?
Plenty of fruits and vegetables.
Get rid of processed foods we don't want.
Processed foods.
We want natural foods.
You want to keep your weight under control as much as possible.
You want to avoid toxins like alcohol and cigarettes and etcetera.
You know the newest recommendations about alcohol really are did a 180 from what was recommended before where?
We were told, hey, one to two drinks a night is probably OK. It's actually might be helpful for your heart.
Well, that's not the case.
And if you look at the big studies, pretty much every other disease process, including neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's and everything, are increased with alcohol use. And so it's kind of gone full circle. And and we're saying now that, hey, yes, you can have an occasional drink.
But don't make it a regular thing and so.
Avoiding those types of toxins to your body.
They are very important, avoiding excesses, right?
And you know, too many carbs, things like that, avoiding.
You know, even you think about right?
I think about even intense athletes as you get older, right? And and you want to keep that level of intensity and you think, well, I'm exercising, right. But but if it's really, really intense and it's pounding on your, on your joints and your and it causes an inj.
Then you're down for a while.
And that puts your body, you know, in a different place.
Managing stress, right?
I mean, this is probably a big thing that we've underestimate in medicine is the impact of stress and stress hormones on on our health and.
So having a regimen to you know what?
What makes you relieve that stress?
Is it being social?
Is it being out with people?
Is it meditation?

Is it doing yoga?
Is it doing something else? That's something to really be able to manage these stressors of everyday life, you know, no matter who you are, you have stresses and and trying to deal with that is incredibly important.
And I think social media has made that a whole lot worse, and then, you know, the final thing I'll put in here is sleep.
You know, we have very, very good data that the lack of sleep.
Is #1 common and #2?
Has a major impact on our lives, and so if you can work on those things and get those in a good place and you want to take supplement, you know I say go ahead and knock yourself out.

Katie Caviness-Crolley 17:35
That's a great answer.
Thank you so much.
Thank you for your time.
It was great to have you and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to medicine made general.
We hope you found today's conversation helpful.
Here at Hopkins, Gim we're not just about advancing medical knowledge.
We're committed to making healthcare accessible for all. If you'd like to support our efforts, please visit our website, charitable giving at Hopkins Gim to learn more.
Until next time, stay informed.
Stay healthy.