



VITAMIN A AND BIRTH DEFECTS

The consumption of vitamin A at levels at or above 10,000 IU (200% of the Daily Value, or DV), or 3000 Retinol equivalents (REs), and some types of birth defects has raised serious public health concerns. A relationship between vitamin A intakes and birth defects has been known for some time, but the level of vitamin A associated with earlier studies was much higher than the levels indicated by the new study.

As a precautionary measure, FDA has several recommendations for women of childbearing age relative to consuming foods containing vitamin A, including dietary supplements.

First, the form of vitamin A that is of concern is preformed vitamin A. Preformed vitamin A is found in animal products, primarily liver, and also may be added to fortified foods such as breakfast cereals and dietary supplements (examples of preformed vitamin A include retinyl palmitate and retinyl acetate, which are found in the products' ingredient listings). Women need to limit their intakes to about 100% of the DV for preformed vitamin A for these sources from this nutrient.

On the other hand, beta-carotene is a substance found naturally in plants, and it can be converted to vitamin A in the body. It is considerably less toxic than the preformed vitamin A. Therefore, women of childbearing age are advised to choose fortified foods that contain vitamin A in the form of beta-carotene rather than preformed vitamin A, whenever possible. The vitamin A in fruits and vegetables is naturally in the form of beta-carotene, and high intakes of vitamin A from these sources generally are not of concern.

Finally, vitamin A is an essential nutrient. The good health of women throughout childbearing years, including pregnancy, is dependent on the consumption of needed amounts of this nutrient. Taking too little vitamin A can result in adverse effects just as taking in too much can. The key is in finding the "right amount" through carefully reading product nutrition labeling.

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