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Think before popping that pill

Risha Chitlangia | TNN

New Delhi: We don't think twice before popping a multivitamin pill, neither seem to doctors while prescribing it. According to a study on use of vitamin and mineral combinations by National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), Hyderabad, which is a part of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), 54% of doctors in cities and 68% in rural areas prescribe vitamin pills which are irrelevant to the disease concerned.

"People take vitamin pills indiscriminately as they are not aware of their side effects. In fact, we found that doctors based in cities are also irrationally prescribing vitamin pills. According to our findings, almost 40% of the vitamin and mineral combinations prescribed were irrelevant to the disease, while 14% were relevant but the dose was over-prescribed. The situation is even worse in rural areas," said Dr Dinesh Kumar, scientist with NIN and general secretary of Indian Pharmacology Society.

The often prescribed vitamins and minerals are B,C,D,E,A, iron and calcium. Vitamin B and C are water soluble, hence their excess amount is flushed out in urine. But excess of vitamin A,D and E, which are fat soluble, can result in formation of toxic elements inside the body. It can result in long term damage to many organs. "Malnutrition is a major problem in India but overnutrition is also emerging as a big problem, especially in cities. Doctors prescribe vitamins along with drugs to treat diseases but they don't take into account their side effects. For example, anaemia is a serious problem among Indian women but excess of iron can result in kidney failure," said Dr Neeta Kumar of ICMR.

Doctors say that there is an urgent need to monitor use of dietary supplements. "Like antibiotics, dietary supplements should also be monitored and be prescribed only when a patient needs them. Their overdose can lead to neurological problems or affect the motor functions, kidneys etc. One should particularly be careful about the use of fat soluble vitamins," said Dr Sandeep Budhiraja, HOD, internal medicine, Max Healthcare, Saket.

"If one maintains a balanced diet, there is no need for these supplements. The common perception that these supplements can make up for deficiency is wrong. Nothing can substitute a balanced diet," said Dr MP Sharma of Rockland Hospital.

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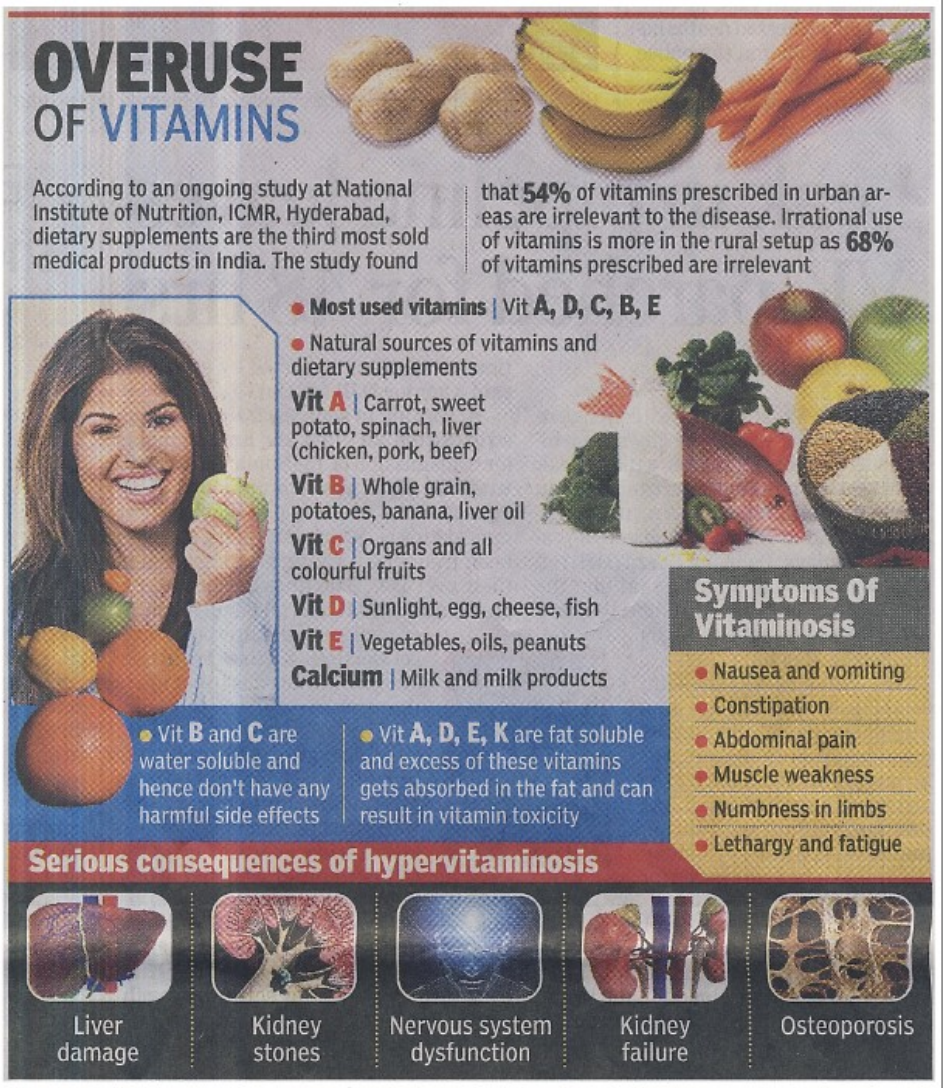

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