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BETTER BALANCE NEEDED IN VITAMIN AND MINERAL DEBATE

Media coverage over potential health threats arising from vitamin and mineral consumption could ironically be doing consumers more harm than good according to Natural Products NZ Chief Executive Alison Quesnel.

“Natural Products NZ (NPNZ) and our members welcome discussion and debate that creates better-informed consumers, but unbalanced coverage of one-off studies suggesting *potential* problems could backfire by scaring consumers off taking supplements that benefit their health.

“It is important that people discuss any concerns with their health professional rather than simply stopping or changing the supplements they are taking,” she says.

Ms Quesnel referred to the current debates about the potential pros and cons of using vitamin D and a study that raised questions about fish oil.

Although occasional studies questioned fish oil’s benefits, the vast majority have shown that fish oil in supplements and/or food can help to lower high levels of triglycerides (unhealthy blood fats).

She also notes many studies show that, when combined with calcium, vitamin D helps to maintain good bone health and protect against osteoporosis.

Significantly, *The Lancet* medical journal recently recommended large clinical studies are undertaken to properly assess vitamin D’s effects on other health conditions such as heart diseases, diabetes, cancer, dementia and inflammatory diseases.

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NPNZ welcomes robust evidence that increases understanding about vitamin and mineral supplements' roles in promoting good health.

Although it is always best to meet one's nutritional needs through a healthy, balanced diet and lifestyle, this is not always possible.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies can have severe and potentially life-threatening effects, which is why supplements such as folate (to prevent spina bifida) and iodine (to prevent conditions associated with poor thyroid function) are routinely added to food products.

Ms Quesnel comments that many media articles about the potential risks associated with particular nutritional supplements are based on selected excerpts from studies that do not actually conclude the extent to which the supplement affects health conditions.

"In reality, many of these studies simply demonstrate the need for more research."

Consumers understandably may be feeling anxious and confused about some of the supplements they are taking.

NPNZ advises that more is not necessarily better and taking excessive amounts of any substance - whether it is a prescription-controlled drug, a vitamin supplement or water – may carry a degree of risk. People are strongly advised to read labels thoroughly and consult with a health professional beforehand.

"We also advise those taking supplements to be wary of sensationalist and negative media reports that undermine advice they have been given by their health professional," she says.

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Why the focus on vitamin D and how to boost levels naturally?

Vitamin D deficiency is becoming increasingly common in New Zealand and the Ministry of Health believes that around 5 per cent of Kiwi adults are deficient and a further 27 per cent have below the recommended vitamin D blood level.

People with low vitamin D risk developing a range of conditions, including rickets (bone deformation), weak bones and heart disorders.

Vitamin D can be boosted through sensible sun exposure or by choosing foods that contain it, for example: oily fish (e.g. salmon, tuna, sardines, eel and warehou), milk and milk products, eggs and liver.

Some foods may also have vitamin D added, including: margarine and fat spreads, some reduced-fat dairy products (e.g. milk, dried milk and yogurt), plant-based dairy substitutes (e.g. soy drinks) and liquid meal replacements. Remember to check the ingredients lists on these foods to see if extra vitamin D has been added.

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Natural Products New Zealand (NPNZ) is a national industry organisation representing this country's natural products, functional foods, complementary medicines, cosmeceuticals and nutraceuticals industries within New Zealand and internationally.

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