

MEDIA RELEASE

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SURVEY FINDS DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS A POPULAR CHOICE FOR GPs AND PHARMACISTS

A recent survey of New Zealand's general practitioners and pharmacists has found that many regularly recommend dietary supplements to patients/consumers, and also take supplements themselves.

The survey's results were similar to those found in another researcher's survey of 900 USA physicians.

Tauranga-based researcher Dr Shaun Holt says Ministry of Health research shows that around half of New Zealanders take dietary and health supplements¹.

He was interested to know which supplements doctors and pharmacists took themselves and which they recommended to patients, so he surveyed 71 attendees at a series of presentations. The survey found that GPs and pharmacists often take dietary and health supplements and most will routinely recommend one or more to their patients.

Of those surveyed, around one in five GPs take a multivitamin or vitamin D supplement, with one in four taking fish oil. Multivitamins, fish oil, calcium, glucosamine/chondroitin, Vitamin C and magnesium were taken by a significant proportion of pharmacists.

Probiotics are also highly recommended by pharmacists (19 out of 21) and GPs (23 out of 50), although few take probiotics themselves, instead recommending taking them short-term with antibiotics so as to prevent gastrointestinal side effects.

Dr Holt says it is encouraging that his survey found that GPs and pharmacists tend to make evidence-based recommendations.

"GPs and pharmacists generally receive very little education about natural products when studying for their qualifications so it was pleasing to see that many appear to be doing their own research and basing their dietary supplement recommendations and personal use on products that are supported by strong research findings.

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He says that dietary supplement use is growing world-wide, with consumers often choosing to self-medicate.

“Doctors and pharmacists regularly tell me that they would like to receive more education about natural products during their training.

“Many try to keep up-to-date with dietary supplement research findings once they have qualified but it can be difficult to keep up with the volume of reading required, and to know which research and sources to trust.”

Dr Holt says trustworthy research and information sources include:

1. Ernst, Edzard, et al. *Oxford handbook of complementary medicine*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
2. *Mayo Clinic Book of Alternative Medicine*, 2nd edition. Time Inc, 2007.
3. Mayo Clinic’s website: www.mayoclinic.org
4. National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine: <http://nccam.nih.gov/>
5. Lesley Braun and Marc Cohen. *Herbs and natural supplements: an evidence based guide*, 3rd edition. Churchill Livingstone2010
6. Chris Tofield’s natural health column in *New Zealand Research Review Journal*.

Case study

General Practitioner Chris Tofield takes dietary supplements and also recommends them to patients, where appropriate.

“I take Omega 3 fish oil because there’s a lot of evidence-based research showing that it’s beneficial for preventing cardiovascular disease and for promoting brain health. It’s also good for joints and, as a keen runner, I take it to stop my knees from becoming achy.”

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Dr Tofield also takes probiotics because research shows it benefits gut health and supports the immune system. He also regularly recommends these two supplements to patients - particularly probiotics for those who are taking antibiotics.

The Tauranga GP believes that integrative medicine – complementing pharmaceutical medicines with natural health products – is the way of the future.

“Both types of products go hand in hand because natural health products support the body, while pharmaceutical drugs treat the condition. Furthermore, there’s evidence that some of the natural treatment can potentially achieve the same outcomes as pharmaceutical medicine.”

For example, a heart attack sufferer would benefit from a range of pharmaceutical drugs to treat the condition and prevent its recurrence. Additional natural products, such as fish oil, could be given in conjunction to further reduce the risk.

“I have found that patients are generally very happy to accept my recommendation to take a dietary supplement,” says Dr Tofield. “As would be the case with pharmaceutical medicines, it is important to recommend supplements that work and this is why I take care to recommend natural products that are backed by evidence-based science.”

References

1. University of Otago and Ministry of Health. 2011. A Focus on; Nutrition: Key findings of the 2008/09 New Zealand Adult Nutrition Survey. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

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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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