

Yes, you can overdo vitamins, and it can land you in hospital

Quest for wellness can turn risky as people pop pills that may do more harm than good

Pushpa Narayan & Lata Mishra | TNN

Plagued by both stress and insomnia, Arundhati Reddy, a 45-year-old banker, began taking magnesium supplements six months ago — echoing a growing fad among the health-conscious. When the initial dose didn't help, she doubled her intake and added gummies marketed as 'muscle relaxants'.

Within weeks, she began to suffer from fatigue, dizziness, and an irregular heartbeat. One morning, she collapsed and was rushed to the emergency room. Doctors found dangerously high magnesium levels disrupting her heart rhythm and causing a sharp drop in blood pressure. The diagnosis: hypermagnesaemia, a potentially life-threatening condition. "I never thought something natural like magnesium could harm me. I assumed any excess would be flushed out," says Reddy.

Her case is a cautionary tale. While India's booming nutraceutical market, valued at over \$8 billion and expected to grow to \$11 billion by 2027, according to Euromonitor and Kearney, has increased access to supplements, it has also led to arbitrary use. "Some take weekly doses of 60,000 IU of vitamin D every day. That level of toxicity can land them in hospital," says Dr Sruti Chandrasekaran, endocrinologist at Rela Hospital in Chennai. "Scientific evidence does not support the use of supplements to prevent chronic disorders such as diabetes or hypertension. Instead, a balanced diet, and regular physical activity have consistently been shown to cut chronic disease risk and support overall well-being."

Right Patient, Right Dose

Supplements can be life-enhancing, but only when used to correct specific deficiencies or medical conditions. Women in perimenopause and menopause, for example, are commonly advised to take 1,000-1,200 mg of calcium daily, but supplements are prescribed when diet alone isn't enough — especially for those with osteoporosis risk or limited calcium sources. Iron tablets are prescribed for patients with anaemia, malabsorption, or after weight-loss surgery. But even when supplements



Vit A, D, E, and K (fat-soluble) pose highest risk as they aren't easily excreted

DON'T BINGE ON THESE VITAMINS

Vit D: High calcium levels, leading to multiple complications

Vit E: Bleeding disorders, especially when mixed with anticoagulants

Vit B6 (Pyridoxine): Neuropathy

Zinc: Diarrhoea and gastrointestinal symptoms

Iron: Constipation, digestive disorders, and fatigue

Vit C: Diarrhoea and, in some cases, kidney stones

Magnesium: Irregular heartbeats, low BP, and fatigue

NATURE'S WAY OR THE EASY WAY?

	Orange (100g)	Vit C tablet (1,000mg)
VITAMIN C	53 mg	1,000 mg
OTHER NUTRIENTS	Fiber, potassium, folate, antioxidants	Only vitamin C
SUGAR CONTENT	9g natural	0g
CALORIES	50 kcal	0 kcal
ABSORPTION	Slower, more balanced	Faster, limited (200 mg)

are justified, dosage matters as well as how you take them. "Iron and calcium should not be taken together because calcium interferes with iron absorption," Dr Chandrasekaran warns. "Vitamin D, on the other hand, is often paired with calcium."

Candyceutical Illusion

Some supplements come packaged as colourful, fruit-flavoured gummies aka 'candyceuticals'. "Supplements, in whichever form — pills, powder, gummies, or syrup — are medicines," says Dr Farah Ingale, director of internal medicine at Hiranandani Hospital. "People forget that gummies contain sugar, artificial flavours, and have lower bioavailability. The body doesn't absorb nutrients from them as efficiently as from pills or food."

Overconsumption is easy — and dangerous. Anjali Sharma (name

changed), a 42-year-old homemaker from Mumbai, learned this the hard way. "Every health influencer I followed swore by the power of vitamin D — they called it the 'sunshine shield' against fatigue and infections," she said. When she found vitamin D gummies labelled as natural immunity boosters, she didn't think twice. "They tasted like candy, and I took three a day instead of one, thinking more meant stronger immunity." Months later, Sharma developed fatigue, nausea, and confusion. Tests showed alarmingly high calcium levels — a sign of vitamin D toxicity. Scans revealed nephrocalcinosis — calcification within kidney tissue. Despite aggressive treatment, she eventually required dialysis.

Wellness Gone Wrong

Many people believe excess vitamins are simply excreted, but that's only

partly true. "Kidneys clear out water-soluble vitamins like vitamin C and B-complex," explains Dr Manish Itollikar, internal medicine expert at Fortis Hospital, Mulund. "But fat-soluble vitamins — A, D, E, and K — are stored in body tissues and not easily excreted. Prolonged or high-dose intake can cause toxicity."

Dr Itollikar says supplements should be prescribed for limited durations and specific conditions such as illness, malabsorption, or gastrointestinal disorders. "We've

Supplements must be taken right too.

For instance, some have mistakenly taken weekly doses of 60,000 IU of Vit D every day. It can land them in hospital

Dr Sruti Chandrasekaran, ENDOCRINOLOGIST



had patients who took vitamin A for skin improvement without prescriptions and ended up with elevated liver enzymes and a swollen, congested liver — classic signs of hypervitaminosis A," he adds.

Gaps In Regulation

Experts also point out that unlike prescription drugs, most supplements fall under the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), not the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO). "So, stringent requirements for proving medical benefits, absorption levels, side effects, or overdose risks often go unnoticed," says Dr Vyankatesh Shivane, consultant diabetologist at Jaslok Hospital.

Multiple Prescriptions

Adding to the chaos, patients often consult multiple doctors, each prescribing different vitamins or minerals without reviewing existing regimens. The Indian Medical Association has urged practitioners to review all supplements a patient is taking before prescribing new ones. This, they say, can prevent unnecessary or overlapping treatments.