Getting your fill of chlorophyll [1]

Dear Alice,

A coworker of mine was drinking a green liquid at the office and told me that it was "chlorophyll water". Neither of us are sure what the health benefits of ingesting chlorophyll are, and it's hard to find reliable info on the internet. Is this fad based in medical fact, or is it just a weird new drink to try?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Now that your coworker has planted the idea of chlorophyll's health benefits in your mind, it's time to dig up some facts. Chlorophyll has been used as a supplement since the 1960s, although chlorophyllin, a solution of sodium copper salts made from chlorophyll, is more commonly and inexpensively available (this is likely what your coworker's ?chlorophyll water? contained). Although it does have some approved uses and suspected health benefits, no long-term or large-scale studies with humans have been done to conclusively prove its supposed health-boosting properties. Furthermore, while most supplements are made with chlorophyllin, studies suggest that chlorophyll — naturally available in vegetables such as spinach, parsley, and garden cress — may be a more potent health agent.

Chlorophyllin-containing papain/urea ointments and sprays are sometimes prescribed to treat inflammation, speed healing, and reduce odor in wounds. Patients with colostomies and ileostomies can also take over-the-counter supplements containing chlorophyllin to reduce fecal odor, although some studies dispute the efficiency in this. While these are the only two approved uses for chlorophyllin, other potential positive health effects may include:

- **Reducing damage from carcinogens.** Chlorophyll has been shown to bind to carcinogens, such as those in tobacco smoke and cooked meats, thus reducing their ability to enter the bloodstream and reach tissues.
- **Protecting against liver cancer.** A study in China showed that a biomarker for aflatoxin, a carcinogen found in improperly stored grains which causes liver cancer, was present at lower levels in participants who simultaneously consumed the toxin and chlorophyll. Because the development of cancer takes many years, however, the long-term effectiveness of chlorophyll is unclear.
- **Treating trimethylaminuria [2] (or fishy body odor).** Chlorophyll reduces the amount of trimethylamines, and the associated fishy odor, excreted by people with this hereditary condition.
- **Combating colon cancer.** Chlorophyllin has been shown to inhibit DNA synthesis and repair processes in colon cancer cells, giving it potential for use in cancer therapy.
- **Antioxidant** [3] properties.

It's important to note that chlorophyllin also has potential side effects. Taken by mouth, it can cause urine or feces to appear greenish, black or yellow discoloration of the tongue, or occasional diarrhea. Used as an ointment or spray, it can cause a slight burning or itching sensation. Despite these mild side effects, no major toxicity in chlorophyll or chlorophyllin has been discovered in more than 50 years of popular use. Because of the lack of substantial research into chlorophyllins, however, those who are pregnant or breastfeeding may want to avoid this supplement or check in with a health provider before using it.

In summary, while the grass may be greener on the chlorophyll-watered side, science has yet to demonstrate its health benefits outside of a few very specific uses.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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