What’s the deal with DHEA? [1]

(1)

Dear Alice,

What do you think about DHEA? I've been hearing so much lately. I have the rudimentary information about what it is, what it is supposed to do, but what do we know about the long-range effects of taking it? Thanks.

(2)

Dear Alice,

Have you any information on the supplement DHEA (I think I spelled it correctly). It's supposed to be the male supplement counterpart to the female hormone replacement women use (estrogen) to delay or slow the effects of menopause. Any thoughts on this? Testosterone production slows in men as they age. I read that men can take DHEA and slow the aging process or for help with body building. Am I dreaming or what?

(3)

Dear Alice,

Do you have any advice on DHEA supplements. I have read several interesting articles about the effects of DHEA supplementation in a clinical setting. However, I presume that the DHEA used was the synthetic variety, as opposed to the products that are based on Mexican Yams that are available to the general public without a prescription.

Answer

Dear Readers,

DHEA, short for dehydroepiandrosterone, is a hormone produced in the human body. It is also a popular nutritional supplement, used for everything from reversing the signs of aging to increasing muscle mass. In the body, DHEA is a steroid hormone produced by the adrenal glands. The body converts DHEA into hormones, including testosterone and estrogen. Natural DHEA levels peak at about 30 years, and then gradually decline with age. Many people take DHEA to replace the DHEA that is lost with age. However, since the specific role of DHEA in the body remains unclear, there may be a good reason why the body naturally produces less DHEA with age. DHEA precursors in soy and wild yams do not become DHEA in the human
body, so eating these will not increase the amount of DHEA in your body \textit{only} the synthetic form does that.

DHEA was sold as an oral supplement in health food stores until 1985, when the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned its sales based on a lack of evidence that DHEA was neither safe nor effective. After this ban was lifted in 1994, the FDA approved its over-the-counter distribution as a nutritional supplement. Since nutritional supplements are not regulated by the FDA, quality, purity, and effectiveness of DHEA supplements vary by manufacturer (which is why some critics say that only prescribed DHEA is effective). You can check with a health food store to see which brands they recommend.

DHEA has been touted as having anti-aging, anti-depressant, anti-obesity, \textit{and} anti-cancer benefits. But there have been no long term studies on DHEA, so the jury's still out on both its benefits and its risks. This is especially true because too high levels of sex hormones (for which DHEA is a precursor) have been linked to hormone-sensitive cancers (e.g. breast, ovarian, and prostate). In addition, when excessive doses (100 mg a day) are taken, women may grow excess facial hair, experience deepened voice, have acne breakouts, lose (head) hair, and increase their risk of heart disease. Men may develop enlarged breasts and increase their risk of prostate cancer. Talk about a booby trap! Also, research indicates that high doses of DHEA may cause liver damage. However, DHEA seems to hold some promise in helping people to age well by enhancing quality of life (physical and psychological well-being) in their golden years. In addition, the FDA is currently testing DHEA for treatment of lupus. DHEA has been banned for use by several athletic agencies, including those regulating the Olympics and university athletics.

Of note: Most of the claims being made about DHEA's benefits are based on results from animal, rather than human, studies. This is problematic because other animals do not produce their own DHEA at all like humans do, so their bodies may respond to it quite differently. Fewer studies have looked at the effects of DHEA on humans. Most of these studies have been short-term, clinical trials looking at insufficient numbers of older people taking relatively low doses of DHEA. Although many of these studies have reported benefits and few side effects, others have shown no benefits over a placebo. For more definitive information, additional clinical trials studying DHEA use in humans are needed.

As for how much DHEA you should take, the recommended dosage is 1/4 to one 25mg tablet daily for adults. It is better to take DHEA along with food that has some fat in it to improve its absorption. DHEA's benefits supposedly take effect within two to three weeks of usage. DHEA supplements are recommended for people in good health and older than 30 years of age. If you decide to take DHEA, be cautious and seek out supervision from a heath care provider. And remember, even if you're using DHEA, stick with a healthy diet and regular exercise routine for best results.

Alice!

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