High-Dose Supplements for Age-Related Macular Degeneration: Did You Leave Out Centrum?

We read with interest the excellent study in the October 2001 issue of the Archives. The title and conclusions are quite specific that supplementation with vitamin C (300 mg), vitamin E (400 IU), and beta carotene (15 mg) with zinc oxide (80 mg) should be considered for patients with extensive intermediate-size drusen, at least 1 large druse, noncentral geographic atrophy in 1 or both eyes, or advanced age-related macular degeneration (AMD) or vision loss caused by AMD in 1 eye (without contraindications, such as smoking).

In the body of the article, however, the authors point out that 57% of study participants were already taking antioxidant vitamins before enrolling in the study, and an additional 13% who were not taking supplements chose to take the multivitamin and mineral supplement Centrum (Whitehall-Robins Healthcare, Madison, NJ) during the trial. Thus, 67% of those in the trial also concurrently took Centrum. Because the levels of vitamins C and E, beta carotene, and zinc were small in the Centrum compared with the supplements, it was thought that Centrum added little to the total dose or efficacy of the antioxidants. But Centrum contains much more than vitamins C and E, beta carotene, and zinc. It also contains vitamins D, E, K, B6, and B12; thiamin; riboflavin; niacin; folic acid; biotin; pantothenic acid; calcium; iron; phosphorus; iodine; magnesium; selenium; copper; manganese; chromium; molybdenum; chloride; potassium; boron; nickel; silicon; tin; vanadium; and now lutein. Could it be that the reason the antioxidants worked was that the patients were also taking Centrum? Should the title and conclusions have added Centrum to the supplements given in this study, and should we be recommending this to our patients? The authors stated that the treatment effect of the study formulations was in the beneficial direction for both the AMD patients who took and didn’t take Centrum, but then they state that the data are “not shown” and that “these comparisons are underpowered.”

If we are to believe the conclusions of the paper, shouldn’t our patients be told that the study subjects took these specific supplements in addition to Centrum? Was something that was ingested by the subjects left out of the recommendations and title?

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