



Antioxidant supplements do not slow the decline in mental agility that comes with age, according to a study of women with or at risk for cardiovascular disease published June 9 in *Circulation*, the journal of the American Heart Association.

Growing evidence suggests that heart and blood vessel disease may play a role in mental declines in the elderly, including Alzheimer's dementia. Because many older men and women already have heart disease or are at high risk, minimizing the effects of blood vessel problems on mental ability would help millions of elderly Americans and their caregivers. One treatment under investigation is dietary supplementation with antioxidant vitamins such as vitamin E.

Antioxidants are substances that block *free radicals*, damaging compounds produced in the body by inflammation, stress, and some normal cellular processes. It is thought that regular antioxidant supplements may prevent some damage to the heart and blood vessels that can cause heart disease, stroke, and possibly dementia. However, an earlier report from the Women's Antioxidant Cardiovascular Study (WACS) found that antioxidants did not prevent heart disease or heart attacks in high-risk women. Read more [here](#).

The latest study included 2824 women 65 years or older who had cardiovascular disease or were at high risk. The women followed a regimen of one or more antioxidant supplements (vitamin E, beta-carotene, and vitamin C) for 9 years. They took tests of mental sharpness over the final 5 years, and were compared with a group of women who had only taken dummy pills.

In general, the results were disappointing, showing that no combination of antioxidant supplements was able to slow the decline in mental function over a 9-year study period. Vitamin E and beta-carotene supplements had no effect on any of the test scores. Women taking vitamin C had better average results on both the first and last mental tests, but the difference was small enough that it could have been due to chance.

Interesting, when the researchers looked only at women who suffered a heart attack or stroke during the study, they found that women taking vitamin C had a 15% slower loss of mental ability than those who did not, although this effect was also small enough that it could have been due to chance. This tentative finding needs investigation in further studies.

Until researchers identify effective treatments, "use it or lose it" remains the best general approach to maintaining your mental abilities into old age. Proven ways to stay sharp as long as possible include:

- Staying mentally active
- Getting involved in social and community activities
- Exercising regularly
- Controlling your heart disease risk factors, especially
 - [High blood pressure](#)
 - [High cholesterol](#)
 - [Diabetes](#)

- [Quitting Smoking](#)
- Drinking alcohol in moderation

Source: Kang JH, Cook NR, et al. Vitamin E, vitamin C, beta-carotene, and cognitive function among women with or at risk of cardiovascular disease. The Women's Antioxidant and Cardiovascular Study. *Circulation*. 2009;199:2772-2780.

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