



Behavioral/Social/Cultural Factors That Determine Dietary Supplement Use in the Elderly

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Dietary supplement use is a world-wide growing phenomenon. Few studies, however, examine why increasing numbers of consumers are choosing to use dietary supplements. Some of the more frequently reported motivations for the increasing use of dietary supplements include a desire for health maintenance, a response to changes in eating patterns or health status due to changes in acute or chronic conditions, a belief in “anti-aging medicine,” concerns about the adequacy or safety of the consumer food supply, or a desire for greater autonomy and control over self-care. Triggers for increasing the use of dietary supplements differ for different groups of persons and stem from different behavioral, social, and cultural roots. How can theoretical constructs such as susceptibility, locus of control, and self efficacy be useful in helping to understand the growth in use of dietary supplements? How do motivations differ across different segments of the population? What factors are primary motivators for initiation of supplement behaviors as well as the decision-making related to short-term or long-term use? How do use of supplements and herbs vary across cultures? How has information technology influenced the growth in supplement use? How do social norms influence the growth in use?

For some, the growing use of dietary supplements and herbs are part of the growing use of health promotion and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices, which also may include other psychological and spiritual therapies. Other consumers express dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of efficacy and excessive dependence on prescription medication within the traditional medical community, as well as a lack of holism and ignorance of social and spiritual dimensions of health by many medical doctors. Others experiencing or perceiving the effects of aging use dietary supplements to address and treat explicit symptoms (“energy,” memory lapses, joint pain, etc). The growth in Internet and television advertising has heightened consumer awareness and exposure to the existence of potential products. A group including the 8.9 million cancer survivors in the United States may still have a different psychological profile, which may trigger an aggressive effort to adopt supplement practices. These efforts contribute to increased self esteem, mastery, and quality of life at levels with a level of vigilance not observed to the same extent with chronic conditions.

Conclusions

Many of the factors driving decision-making among dietary supplement users relate to consumer perceptions of benefit, control, and quality of life. Social norms and increased exposure via the television and Internet have expanded traditional sources of information beyond the physician, friends, and family.

Research Needs

Many emerging behavioral constructs are poorly conceptualized and measured. Research is needed to improve measurement of values, including the consideration of use patterns across different cultural groups across the globe. Research is needed to identify triggers of initiation of use for categories of dietary supplements and factors that contribute to sustained use versus discontinuation of the various categories of dietary supplements. Research is needed to characterize temporal (acute and chronic) patterns of use. Research is needed to quantify the potential for risk from diet-drug-supplement interactions, as well as consumption patterns consistently in excess of the DRI Upper Limits.

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