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Beliefs about Multi-Vitamin and Mineral Supplements in College-Aged Students – Differences Between Users and Non-Users

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This was one part of a larger study designed to examine beliefs about multi-vitamin and mineral (V&M) supplements in college students. Two hypotheses were tested: that there would be no significant difference in beliefs of those students who take V&M supplements and those who do not; and that weight status would not differ between users and non-users of V&M supplements. A convenience sample of 335 students from Louisiana Tech University completed a two-page questionnaire. Information collected included demographics; self reported weight status, exercise habits and interest in nutrition; and beliefs about 18 statements scored using a Likert scale, where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree. Participants were between 18 and 25 years of age, with 44% being male. Only 23 students self-reported as underweight (7%), 243 reported having a normal weight (72%), and 69 self-reported as overweight (21%). About 39% (n = 130) reported current use of V&M supplements. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS, and hypotheses were tested using ANOVA and t-tests. Among users, 60% reported consuming V&M supplements for the purpose of immunity; 30% consumed them for physical appearance; 30% said they take them to complete their diets; 20% for physical performance enhancement; and 11% for weight loss management. Of the 205 nonusers, 197 (96%) said they would use V&M supplements if recommended by a physician, 171 (83%) if recommended by a nurse, 182 (88%) if recommended by a dietitian, and 140 (68%) if recommended by a coach. Users were significantly more inclined to believe that physical appearance (4.26 + .62 vs 3.95 + .82, p=.000) and fatigue (3.50 + .79 vs 3.10 + .93, p=.000) could be enhanced by the use of V&M supplements. The belief that V&M supplements contributed to weight loss or weight gain was not different between users and non-users. Other differences in beliefs between users and non-users included the idea that supplements are a waste of money (1.84 + .68 vs. 2.61 + .92, p=.000), supplements are needed only if you have a bad diet (1.94 + .88 vs 2.46 + .95; p=.000), and college students are not at risk for a V&M deficiency (1.62 + .77 vs 1.89 + .8; p=.003). Mean scores for most of the statements from both groups were close to 3 (neither agree nor disagree), suggesting a lack of certainty about the role of supplements. Results suggest a need for public education about vitamin and mineral supplements. Increased knowledge may impart a change in attitudes and beliefs among non-users. V&M supplements offer a plethora of health benefits. However, due to lack of regulation by the FDA, and a knowledge deficit in relation to supplements, misuse may be common.