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Food Facts vs. Food Quacks

SELDOM IF EVER IN HISTORY has interest in foods, diets, and nutrition run so high as it runs today. Chemical additives and supplements of various kinds have held a special place in the limelight recently, in connection with federal legislation on food additives. Both before and since passage of the 1958 Food Additives Amendment, the public has been exposed to great quantities of discussion on the merits of food supplementation.

Unfortunately, not all of the discussion has been objective or intelligent, and some of it has been downright deceptive. Even more unfortunately, quacks and food faddists have seized upon the increased interest in foods, and with a vigor that more conscientious groups would do well to emulate, have played upon it in the promotion of their dubious products and services.

Late last year, the Food and Drug Administration reported a disturbing increase in quackery involving false and misleading claims for a great variety of vitamins, minerals, and other food supplements. According to Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Arthur S. Flemming, "Unscrupulous operations in this field, in fact, have become the most widespread and expensive form of medical quackery in the country today." The American Medical Association has estimated that this racket now costs some 10 million Americans more than \$500 million a year.

The real tragedy in this situation lies in the certainty that some people who need medical aid will accept at face value the exaggerated claims of ignorant or unscrupulous promoters, will rely on products which actually cannot help them, and will thus fail to get proper medical attention until it is too late.

For the normally healthy individual, such products in ordinary doses are not harmful in themselves. And special vitamin and mineral products, as Secretary Flemming points out, may serve a useful purpose when for some reason the diet requires this kind of supplement.

But for the vast majority of Americans, the ingestion of vitamin and mineral preparations outside the regular diet is a relatively costly and largely useless indulgence. For the American food supply, as FDA has frequently declared, is unsurpassed in volume, variety, and nutritional value. By patronizing all departments of their modern food store, Americans can easily supply all their nutritional needs. In fact, says FDA, Americans have to go out of their way, nutritionally speaking, to avoid being well nourished. Scientifically guided food improvement programs have succeeded to the point that once prevalent deficiency diseases such as rickets and pellagra are now rare—so rare that it is difficult to find a case for clinical study.

Much credit for this happy state of affairs is due the food industry for its efforts to provide an ever-increasing variety of wholesome and nutritious foods; further credit is due chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturers who have made nutritional supplements available for food enrichment.

Flour, bread, milk, margarine, cornmeal, rice, and many other important foods are now enriched with vitamins and minerals under standards set by FDA. In addition, fruits, leafy vegetables, dairy products, and other natural sources of nutritional essentials have become staples in the national diet.

Nutrition education in the schools has helped greatly to improve the nation's dietary habits. It augurs well for the future. And it could help in the immediate present, too, if all students would pass along to their parents the sound nutritional information they acquire at school. For in fighting quackery, law enforcement is only part of the answer. Equally or more important is the need to help the public understand the facts about nutrition, and to warn the people against false claims and theories.

In the interests of their own health and their pocketbooks, more people need to understand that vitamins and minerals, in the proper amounts, have a recognized place in modern nutrition and preventive medicine, but they are not substitutes for medical care when illness or disease is present.

Eat well. If you are sick, see your doctor.