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Smart vitamins

A homocysteine level could see a greater use -- as an Alzheimer's indicator. The discovery of a possible link between homocysteine and Alzheimer's disease means this blood test should be done on everyone. Homocysteine is a benign amino acid that is found naturally in our blood. However, when the level exceeds 8, there is a progressive increase of all cause mortality at an earlier age. This includes cancer, heart attacks, violent causes of death, as well as Alzheimer's disease.

In a recent "New England



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Journal" article, the 30 percent of people in the study with the highest homocysteine levels had twice the risk of developing Alzheimer's as those with average levels. Even a small increase above the norm increased the risk. In most cases this is easily treated. Scientists have found that patients can lower homocysteine levels by taking supplements: 800 mg. of folic acid; 200 mg. of vitamin B6; and 1000 mcg. of B12.

There is a prescription pill called Foltx that has been effective. It combines 2500 mg. of folic acid, 25 mg of B6, and 1000 mg. of B12 and costs about \$15 a month.

These vitamins could represent a crucial advance in preventing Alzheimer's. So far, people can't do anything about the two definite risk factors for the disease identified to date: age and family history -- (the presence of specific genetic trait: APOE epsilon 4). The homocysteine test, CPT 83090, has been used in

our office for the last five years. You should know your homocysteine level like you know your phone number. Medicare pays the national limit of \$23.31 for the test, which is also paid for by other insurance companies. Other supplements that could help if these three vitamins do not work are SAME, NAC (n-acetylcysteine) or Betaine. Decreasing coffee and meat intake may also help. Niacin as well as the cholesterol drug Tricor, also raises homocysteine.

In "JAMA", June 26, 2002, there were two back-to-back articles and an editorial on Alzheimer's disease. Apparently, consuming natural vitamin E from nuts and vegetables greatly decreased the incidence of Alzheimer's disease; however, the synthetic supplement of vitamin E, dl-alpha tocopherol, has not. As I wrote in an earlier article "E or Not to E", one needs natural vitamin E containing all eight subtypes of this important vitamin.