



## what's the good of vitamins?

Despite their billion-dollar sales, a government advisory panel in the US recently declared there was insufficient evidence to either recommend or reject vitamin pills as a way to reduce the risk of heart disease or cancer.

After examining several dozen studies, the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) published its findings in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

They state that evidence for these diseases and the routine use of vitamins A, C or E, multivitamins with folate, or antioxidant combinations, is conflicting or inadequate.

### where supplements may be harmful

The USPSTF ruled against the use of beta-carotene, either alone or in combination pills. Research has shown that heavy smokers who took large doses of beta-carotene pills had higher rates of cancer and death than people who didn't take them, and the benefit to non-smokers was not proven. However, there is no evidence of harm in taking beta-carotene naturally through foods.

### where supplements may be helpful

Certain vitamin supplements do have a confirmed role in some areas of health. For example, folate taken by women who are planning a pregnancy, can reduce the risk of spina bifida by about 70 per cent! And even a low dose of a B<sub>12</sub> supplement (at the recommended daily intake) in strict vegetarians can prevent megaloblastic anaemia and irreversible brain damage.

### recommendations

To minimise cancer and heart disease risk, there is overwhelming evidence that diets rich in fruit, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains work better than vitamin pills. Taking vitamins will not replace a healthful diet. Plant foods contain hundreds of other nutrients and phytonutrients, which cannot all fit into a pill!

Turn to **page 57** for a naturally healthful recipe, high in nutrition, prepared by celebrity chef Charmaine Solomon for Food Matters.