Finding New Health Benefits for Vitamin K Study links vitamin K levels to longevity

Vitamin K, once thought important primarily for blood clotting, may also offer a wider array of health benefits. One recent Spanish study reported that people with the highest dietary intake of vitamin K were at significantly lower risk of mortality from cardiovascular disease, cancer and all causes. And if you're not already consuming plenty of vitamin K—found in dark leafy greens, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and other vegetables (see box)—it's not too late to start. The study also found that people who increased their vitamin K intake were at lower mortality risk.

"This finding comes from the PREIMED study," notes Health & Nutrition Letter editor Irwin H. Rosenberg, MD, "an important and authoritative trial in Spain which was conducted by researchers who are leaders in the field. More recent research has found that vitamin K may also activate several other important proteins in the body. Vitamin K's effect on blood clotting is why patients on blood thinners, such as warfarin (Coumadin), need to avoid foods that might increase their consumption of foods rich in vitamin K. Usually boosting their intake of spinach, broccoli and similar foods could decrease the effectiveness of the medication, while cutting back on those vegetables could mean your dosage is now too high."

"Blood thinners are among the top 15 drugs prescribed in this country," notes Sarah L. Booth, PhD, director of Tufts' SfNRCa Vitamin K Laboratory "and adverse drug events for these drugs account for some staggering numbers among the elderly."

But being put on blood-thinning medication doesn't mean you can never eat green vegetables again, she emphasizes: "Work with your healthcare provider to have green vegetables in your diet that contain healthy nutrients but may not have the high amount and variability in content of vitamin K that the greens listed have. Leafy green vegetables and other green plant-based products, such as peas, are still healthy but are not so rich in vitamin K. Also, there are ways to have modest amounts of those high vitamin K greens in the diet, such as spinach, as including some raw spinach in combination with other plant-based foods. Vitamin K is also found in some green fruits, such as kiwis and green apples (especially the peels), but not in amounts that would be comparable to those on blood-thinning medication."

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By the Numbers: Much of what we know about the content of vitamin K in the US food supply comes from research conducted by Tufts' A Vitamin K Laboratory. Phylloquinone (K1), found in leafy green and cruciferous vegetables, makes up about 90% of our dietary vitamin K. The body can also use K1 from the diet to synthesize menaquinone (K2), which takes several different forms. Menaquinone-4, for example, is found in milk and margarine, fermented foods and soy products, as well as some other foods.