

Are All Supplement Ingredients Good for You?

The Truth About Vitamin E

By Robert Ferguson

Darlene V. is a network marketer who sells supplements on social media. She also calls herself a “health coach” and has built a large following. Wanting to expand her knowledge, Darlene enrolled in my *Food as Medicine* online course.

During the course, we discussed something most people never think about: **not all supplement ingredients are good for you.** One of the examples was vitamin E. Many assume vitamin E is always healthy, but the truth is there are **two very different forms**:

- **Natural vitamin E:** Labeled *d-α-tocopherol* (d-alpha-tocopherol). It’s made from plant oils and matches the exact form your body recognizes and uses best.
- **Synthetic vitamin E:** Labeled *dl-α-tocopherol* (dl-alpha-tocopherol). That tiny “l” is a big red flag. It’s made from petrochemicals and contains a mix of eight chemical forms, only one of which is the natural version your body needs.

Here's what many overlook: **it's not only about vitamin E supplements.** Synthetic vitamin E shows up in all kinds of products, including:

- Multivitamins
- Protein powders
- Meal replacement shakes
- Prenatal vitamins
- Energy and nutrition bars
- Some “healthy” fortified foods

That means you might be consuming synthetic vitamin E every day without even knowing it—just by using common supplements and convenience products.

Why This Matters Beyond Cancer

A large study called the **Selenium and Vitamin E Cancer Prevention Trial (SELECT)** showed that men taking high doses of synthetic vitamin E had a **17% increased risk of prostate cancer** compared to placebo (Klein et al., 2011). But if you’re a woman, you might think, “*That doesn’t apply to me.*”

Here’s the bigger picture: synthetic vitamin E carries other problems that affect everyone.

- **Lower effectiveness:** Natural vitamin E is **1.5–2× more bioactive** because it perfectly matches the transport proteins in your body. Synthetic vitamin E’s unnatural forms compete with the natural version, making it less effective overall.
- **Nutrient imbalance:** High doses of synthetic vitamin E can push out γ -tocopherol, another important form of vitamin E with strong anti-inflammatory and protective effects.
- **Potential harm in high doses:** A meta-analysis found that large amounts of synthetic vitamin E may increase all-cause mortality, suggesting that overloading the body with the synthetic form can do more harm than good (Miller et al., 2005).
- **Wasted investment:** Your liver preferentially retains natural vitamin E and excretes much of the synthetic form. That means you may be paying for a supplement—or a protein powder or multivitamin—that your body can’t even use efficiently.

Quick Comparison: Natural vs. Synthetic Vitamin E

Feature	Natural Vitamin E	Synthetic Vitamin E
Label Name	<i>d</i> - α -tocopherol	<i>dl</i> - α -tocopherol
Source	Plant oils (e.g., sunflower, safflower)	Petrochemical-derived
Isomers	Single active form (RRR- α -tocopherol)	8 isomers (only 12.5% natural)
Potency	1.5–2× more bioactive	Lower potency
Transport in Body	Retained and delivered efficiently to tissues	Less retained, much is excreted
Health Impact	Supports natural vitamin E balance	Can displace γ -tocopherol and reduce benefits
Cancer Risk	Not associated with increased risk	Linked to 17% higher prostate cancer risk (SELECT)

Back to Darlene’s Story

When Darlene realized that three of her best-selling supplements contained **synthetic dl-alpha-tocopherol**, she was shocked. You might assume that after learning the risks and lower effectiveness, she would stop selling them. Instead, she unfriended me and continued to promote the same products.

You may be thinking, “*I would never sell a product that could harm someone’s health.*” But this highlights a bigger issue: many supplement sellers and self-proclaimed “health coaches” don’t fully understand the science behind the ingredients they promote. And when money is involved, some find ways to justify it. As the old saying goes, “**Money is the root of all evil.**”

What You Need to Do

- ✓ **Read your labels carefully:** Look for *d-alpha-tocopherol* (natural). Avoid *dl-alpha-tocopherol* (synthetic).
- ✓ **Remember: it's not just about cancer:** Synthetic vitamin E is less effective, less bioavailable, and can disrupt your nutrient balance.
- ✓ **Be your own advocate:** Don't assume a supplement is safe because it's on a store shelf or promoted by someone with a big following.
- ✓ **Work with credible experts:** Trust professionals who can back their recommendations with science—not just marketing hype.

Your health is far too valuable to trust to someone who doesn't know, or chooses to ignore, the difference between natural and synthetic ingredients. If you'd like to schedule a free consultation with me to review your current supplements and make sure you're getting the best for your body, [click here](#). You can also reach me directly at robert@dietfreelife.com.

References

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