

[DHEA - Menace or Miracle?](#)

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HEALING

DHEA - Menace or Miracle?

Potential benefits for those who need it; serious complications for those who don't

Doctor Tandavan

Stop aging now!" "Do we have the fountain of youth?" These are some of the exaggerated claims found in the lay press and in ads selling the "food supplement" DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone). In the human body DHEA is a natural hormone produced by the adrenal gland and is intimately involved in the manufacture of testosterone, estrogen, progesterone and cortisone. It is a vital factor as a hormone precursor in the human endocrine system. It reaches its peak level in both men and women between ages 20 and 30, then gradually decreases. At age 70 the level is 10 to 20% of that at age 20. Logic tells us that if the blood level is lower at the time aging symptoms appear, then we may be able to reverse these symptoms by an exogenous dosage or replacement of the hormone. To some extent this seems to be true, at least there seems to be a decrease in the aging symptoms and a certain well-being as the levels are elevated to those seen in one's youth.

There are reports that adding DHEA to the diet can be anti-depressant, anti-aging, anti-obesity, anti-dementia, give protection to the thymus and reduce stress. It can also protect against heart disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, cancer, viral disease, and postmenopausal syndrome. Most of the evidence is backed only by animal experimentation, and extrapolation from these studies to human use is not very reliable. There is some data from human studies that tend to support the less exaggerated claims in the advertisements. Yet, there are no long term reports sufficient to claim that life is prolonged, or that this is "truly the fountain of youth" or the "wonder hormone of the 90s."

According to Dr. Billie Jay Sahley, a pain clinic operator, DHEA treatment can result in "increased energy and less susceptibility to the ravages of chronic pain and depression."

DHEA is beneficial only if a blood test shows a level much lower than expected for one's age. Otherwise DHEA should not be taken because the body can stop producing it naturally resulting in a dependency on the external source. Should treatment begin, it is important that every six months the blood level be tested and an adjustment made in the dosage if it is excessive. Higher levels can produce a total disruption of the endocrine balance in the body and result in many concurrent symptoms as well as an increased incidence of cancer of the breast in women or prostate cancer in men. Fortunately, side effects from DHEA are relatively few--acne and headaches are among them. Hirsutism may also occur among women, but all of these symptoms are reversed by decreasing or stopping the dosage.

Only top grade pharmaceutically pure DHEA should be used, and vegetarians should be aware it may come from an animal source. Most brands made from the South American yam are not trustworthy, as there is no evidence this precursor source can give a reliable dose or be absorbed and utilized by our bodies.

As aging occurs, most people compensate by adjustments in their lifestyle, making aging the truly natural phenomenon that it is. If one has a good regimen of hatha yoga, sadhana (including meditation) and an adequate vegetarian diet, he is not likely to suffer from aging symptoms.

Dr. Tandavan, 76, retired nuclear physician and hospital staff president, lives in Chicago, where he specializes in alternative healing arts. Visit his home page at the Hinduism Today Website.