

An advocate of the taking of large doses of vitamin C is Dr. Linus Pauling, whose book *Vitamin C and the Common Cold* first came out in 1970.<sup>36</sup> According to Pauling, much larger quantities than the RDA are necessary to enable the vitamin to perform functions other than preventing scurvy, like protecting cells from attack by cold-causing viruses. Pauling says that our ancestors evolved on a vegetarian diet which provided far more vitamin C than meat eaters consume at present. Because evolution takes place very slowly, our bodies doubtless have not changed since prehistoric times. Therefore, we still need\* large quantities of vitamin C today. Pauling advocates taking 1 or 2 grams (1000 to 2000 milligrams) of vitamin C per day, about twenty to forty times the RDA.

Many controlled, double-blind studies on vitamin C and colds have been performed since Pauling's controversial book first came out. A pooling of the data from eight of these showed that there was a difference of a tenth of a cold per year and an average difference in duration of a tenth of a day per cold in those subjects taking vitamin C over those taking the placebo.<sup>37</sup> These are enough data to support the tentative conclusion that the statistical effects of vitamin C, if any, are very small. This does not exclude the possibility that the effects on a few individuals might be considerable.

The difficulties of performing research of this kind were shown vividly in one study, in which a questionnaire given at the end revealed that a number of the subjects had guessed the contents of their capsules. A reanalysis of the results showed that those who received the placebo *who thought they were receiving vitamin C* had fewer colds than the group receiving vitamin C who thought they were receiving placebos!<sup>38</sup> This demonstrated, as clearly as any research has ever done, the wonderful effect on your health of believing in the medicine you are taking (the **placebo effect**).

36. L. C. Pauling, *Vitamin C and the Common Cold* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1970).
37. T. C. Chalmers, Effects of ascorbic acid on the common cold, *American Journal of Medicine* 58 (1975): 532-536.
38. Chalmers, 1975.

Concepts and Controversies

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