

## PREGNANCY MULTIVITAMINS 'UNNECESSARY EXPENSE' FOR MOST: EXPERTS

**PARIS:** Multivitamins and mineral supplements in pregnancy are an "unnecessary expense" with no proven benefits for most well-nourished women or their babies, said a review of science data yesterday. Sold at about 18 Euros (\$20) per month, these supplements are heavily marketed to women in all stages of pregnancy as a means of warding off health problems, said the analysis.

Pregnant women are a soft target for products which promise to give their baby the best start in life "regardless of cost", said the authors. And while daily doses of a B vitamin called folic acid, and vitamin D to a lesser degree, are known to be beneficial, there is no evidence that cocktails stuffed full

of other vitamins are protective. Some may even be harmful, said the paper: high doses of vitamin A can harm a developing fetus.

### Relatively inexpensive

Multivitamin and mineral supplements typically contain 20 or more active ingredients. "We found no evidence to recommend that all pregnant women should take prenatal multi-nutrient supplements beyond the nationally (British) advised folic acid and vitamin D supplements, generic versions of which can be purchased relatively inexpensively," said the review authors. The analysis was published in the Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin, which

informs British doctors and pharmacists about treatment and disease management.

The focus, said the paper, should be on promoting a healthy diet and boosting access to folic acid supplements for lower income women. "For most women who are planning to become pregnant or who are pregnant, complex multivitamin and mineral preparations promoted for use during pregnancy are unlikely to be needed and are an unnecessary expense," the authors wrote.

The team had reviewed published research on folic acid, vitamin D, iron, vitamins C, E and A, and multivitamin supplements in a review of official British guidelines for pregnant women. The guide-

lines recommend 400 micrograms of folic acid daily until 12 weeks of pregnancy, and 10 micrograms of vitamin D throughout pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Much of the evidence on which marketing claims are based, come from studies in low-income countries where pregnant women are more likely to be malnourished, said the authors. Folic acid, a synthetic version of folate, is used to fortify flour and bread to reduce birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord-so-called neural tube defects. Vitamin D is found in some foods and can be synthesized by the body when the skin is exposed to ultraviolet light. It has been linked to a healthy heart and bones. — AFP

## THUMB SUCKERS LESS PRONE TO ALLERGIES: NZ STUDY

**WELLINGTON:** Infants who suck their thumbs or bite their nails appear less prone to allergies as adults, New Zealand researchers have found. Their findings support the theory that early-life exposure to microbial organisms reduces the risk of developing allergies, Otago University scientists concluded. A study, published this week in the US journal Pediatrics, recorded the thumb-sucking and nail-biting habits of 1,037 children when they were aged five, seven, nine and 11 years old.

Researchers then followed up by giving them allergy skin prick tests when they were aged 13 and 32. They found 49 percent of 13-year-olds who did not suck their thumb or bite their nails tested positive to at least one allergy, compared to 38 percent who practiced one of the habits. The allergy level fell to 31 percent for children who did both. The findings remained the

same when participants were 32-years-old, regardless of factors such as parental history of allergies, pet ownership or being breast fed.

"It suggests that being exposed to microbes as a child reduces your risk of developing allergies," lead researcher Bob Hancox said. However, despite the laboratory skin-test results, the researchers said there was no evidence the habits reduced the risk of "real world" diseases linked to allergies.

"Although thumb-suckers and nail-biters had fewer allergies on skin testing, we found no difference in their risk for developing allergic diseases such as asthma or hay fever," they said. They added: "We do not suggest that children should be encouraged to take up these habits, because it is unclear if there is a true health benefit." — AFP



**KAZIRANGA:** In this photograph, an Indian one-horned rhino crosses a path in Kaziranga National Park, some 250kms east of Guwahati. — AFP

## RARE INDIAN RHINOS FACE THREAT FROM POACHERS

THE POACHING NETWORK HAS BECOME MORE SYSTEMATIC, STRONGER, MORE EFFICIENT

**KAZIRANGA:** As night falls over the lush plains of India's Kaziranga national park, a small group of lightly armed forest guards sets out on foot to protect the world's largest population of one-horned rhinos. These men with their ageing rifles and small plastic torches are on the front line of the battle against increasingly sophisticated international poaching networks that prey on the rare animals, entering the park under cover of darkness to kill them for their horns.

A decade ago, India had all but declared victory over poaching in Kaziranga, a 430-square-kilometre protected area of forest in the northeastern state of Assam that is home to around 2,500 rhinos. But recent years have seen an alarming upsurge in the slaughter of the animals, whose horn is highly prized in neighboring China and in Vietnam. At least a dozen rhinos have been poached in Kaziranga in the first six months of this year, more than twice the number killed in the whole of 2006.

"The poaching network has become more systematic, stronger, more efficient," said Amit Sharma, senior coordinator for rhino conservation at WWF India, who blames a surge in demand that has seen prices top \$100,000 per kilo for the final product. "The value of a horn has shot up like anything, that is why people are ready to risk their lives," he added. Park rangers say they are woefully under-equipped to deal with the modern, sophisticated weapons used by the poachers, including AK47s and night-vision goggles.

Many of the myriad insurgent groups operating in India's restive northeast are involved in the trade, which passes through the neighboring state of Nagaland into Myanmar before being smuggled to China. The issue is hugely emotive in Assam, where the rhino is both a source of pride and a big tourist draw. It hit global headlines in April, when a rhino was poached on the very day that Britain's Prince William and his wife Kate visited the national park.

"Many years ago you would see rhinos everywhere around here," said local villager Damayanti Chhetri. "The poachers have no heart." Local people are a vital source of information for the park rangers, providing tip-offs about upcoming poaching raids. But some are also in the pay of the poachers, who rely on their knowledge of the local terrain, according to one senior forest official. "Locals know every corner of the park. Huge money is involved. It is a risky job, and still they do it," said the official.

### Shoot on sight

The risks are high. Kaziranga's forest guards have the right to shoot suspected poachers on sight, and dozens have been killed over the last decade. The policy is controversial, but they argue it is justified as no one is allowed to enter the park without permission. "If we see someone, without any enquiry we can shoot. We will presume that he is a poacher," said one guard who had killed a suspected poacher.

Two years ago Dipen Sawra, a 35-year-old father of two, failed to return home after a forest guard

offered him work cutting firewood. He was later found dead with a bullet wound to the head. "They were good friends, he (the guard) used to come and drink tea with us here," his father Vikari Sawra told AFP at the family's small mud and straw home. "We never thought something like this would happen," he said.

The family say they never received a death certificate or the results of the post-mortem. The guard was arrested on a murder charge, but was later released, and his case is still pending. "I'm old, I can't work, and I have no money for lawyers," said Vikari Sawra. "I lost my most precious thing and I have no money to fight a case."

### Cover-up

Assam's new forests minister Pramila Rani Brahma told AFP in Guwahati that local poverty was fuelling the trade in rhino horn. But she has also ordered an investigation into forest officials suspected of collusion with the poachers. Last month she suspended Kaziranga's director after he failed to inform her a rhino had been killed while she visited the park.

A few weeks earlier, police arrested two forest guards on suspicion of covering up poaching after the corpse of a rhino was found buried in the park, its horn removed. WWF India's Sharma does not believe park authorities are complicit in the trade, but says the pressure they are under may be leading them to cover up incidents of poaching. — AFP

## NO SILVER LINING IN CLIMATE STUDY

**PARIS:** Clouds, which act as thermal regulators for Earth, have altered in character and global distribution due to climate change, and could in turn make warming worse, a study said Monday. A trawl of satellite images has revealed reduced cloudiness in Earth's temperate mid-latitude zones, which lie between the poles and subtropics in both hemispheres, accompanied by a poleward expansion of the subtropical dry zones.

The tops of clouds everywhere rose higher, according to data that stretched over more than two decades from the early 1980s. "These cloud changes enhance absorption of solar radiation by the Earth and reduce emission of thermal radiation to space," said a statement from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego, which took part in the study.

### Changes in cloud distribution

"This exacerbates global warming caused by increasing greenhouse gas concentration." Clouds regulate Earth's temperature by reflecting some solar radiation back into space before it can hit the ground, while also acting as a blanket to limit heat loss from the planet at night. How they are affected by climate change, and how they influence global warming in return, "has been one of the biggest areas of uncertainty for scientists attempting to understand current climate and forecast future trends,"

said Scripps. Satellites originally designed to monitor Earth's weather are not stable enough to reliably track cloud changes over decades. But the team figured out a way to "correct" the data by removing confounding factors such as satellite orbit, instrument calibration and the degradation of sensors. The record revealed clear changes in cloud distribution, which the team then compared to a history of Earth-warming greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere.

"They concluded that the behavior of clouds they observed is consistent with a human-caused increase in greenhouse gas concentrations," said the statement. There was no similar correlation with other potential influences such as ozone levels, human-created aerosols, or natural changes in solar radiation. Another factor on clouds was two major volcanic eruptions—the 1982 El Chichon eruption in Mexico and the 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines, which would have had a net cooling effect on the planet for a few years at a time.

Volcanoes spew out sunlight-reflecting ash and dust which have a short-term cooling effect on the planet. "Barring another volcanic event of this sort, the scientists expect the cloud trends to continue in the future as the planet continues to warm due to increasing greenhouse gas concentrations," said the statement. — AFP

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