



## Vitamania: Our Obsessive Quest For Nutritional Perfection

*Catherine Price*

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Most of us know nothing about vitamins. What's more, what we think we know is harming both our personal nutrition and our national health. By focusing on vitamins at the expense of everything else, we've become blind to the bigger picture: despite our belief that vitamins are an absolute good--and the more of them, the better--vitamins are actually small and surprisingly mysterious pieces of a much larger nutritional puzzle. In *Vitamania*, award-winning journalist Catherine Price offers a lucid and lively journey through our cherished yet misguided beliefs about vitamins and reveals a straightforward, blessedly anxiety-free path to enjoyable eating and good health.

## **Vitamania: Our Obsessive Quest For Nutritional Perfection Details**

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Author : Catherine Price

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**Catherine Price**

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## From Reader Review Vitamania: Our Obsessive Quest For Nutritional Perfection for online ebook

### Angie says

Got this from FirstReads for an honest review.

I really enjoyed this well-researched and well-written book by Catherine Price. If you're looking for some amazing nutritional advice that will change your world and save your life, this isn't it. Her advice is: don't isolate your micronutrients, eat real food (not processed). Not exactly new advice. But that wasn't what she set out to do.

Price answers a lot of basic questions about vitamins. What are these things? What do they do for us? How were they discovered? How do they show up in our lives now, in our foods and elsewhere?

She also takes a few chapters to take a look at the supplement industry, an industry she claims (rightfully so, I think) the very idea of vitamins gave birth to. Without the idea of micronutrients that do unexpected things for our health, the supplement industry wouldn't exist. But she takes the time to explain that the supplement industry is unregulated for the most part, examine the political history of why that is (how it came to be), and the consequences of the lack of oversight. The supplement industry part of this book included details I hadn't known before, even though I knew some of the basic facts, and I appreciate learning about that history.

The most interesting and new part of the book for me was near the end, when Price discusses the unknowns of nutrition as they stand today. There's a heck of a lot we don't know. She gives some examples of how we know that our knowledge is incomplete, which I relished. For example, an apple's antioxidant activity is far higher than is possible with the antioxidants we've isolated and analyzed from the apple. So there's more going on there than we know of. Whole foods include nutrients, molecules, and interactions that are still far beyond our understanding. We do know that fruits and vegetables and meat are good for us, and we know that what they do as whole foods is greater than the sum of the parts we've figured out. So we should keep eating whole foods and not rely on pills for our nutrition.

In the end, it's an easy, chatty read with good info, even if there are no earth-shattering new truths in here. Basically, Price is telling us that there's a lot we don't know, and we should get comfortable with our uncertainty, and not pretend that we have it all figured out and take our pills. Good central thesis, reasonable arguments.

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### Ryan says

My favorite clips from this book:

While nutrition itself is amazingly complex, the healthiest, most scientific, and most pleasurable way to eat is not that complicated at all.

Even if you knew your body's precise vitamin requirements, you wouldn't be able to calculate exactly what percentage of those requirements were represented by the food on your plate.

The more photosynthesis a plant engages in - whether because it's located in a particularly sunny location or

because its natural pigmentation gathers more light - the higher the levels of vitamins and other antioxidant chemicals that it's likely to have.

More than half of Americas fresh fruit comes from overseas.

A constant supply of synthetic vitamins blinds us to our own dependence on them. Without synthetic vitamins and the products that contain them, we'd be as susceptible to deficiency diseases as the societies to whom we provide nutritional aid.

While they're designed - and now often required - to keep us healthy, synthetic vitamins also enable the very products and dietary habits that are making us sick.

The color of brown rice comes from a second interior skin called the pericarp, also known as the polishing.

The first recorded use of the term "calorie" was in 1825 (and it had nothing to do with nutrition). It referred to the amount of energy required to raise the temperature of a kg of water by one degree centigrade in a steam engine.

We have also largely bought into the arrogant assumption that underlies all diet recommendations: the idea that we humans fully understand our nutritional needs.

65% of people in the world are lactose intolerant after childhood.

The advent of synthetic vitamins set the stage for our modern obsession with nutritional shortcuts, our desire to find magic bullets that obviate the hassle of changing what we eat.

We are able to moralize about whether other people should be able to eat golden rice precisely because severe micronutrient deficiency is not a problem in our own lives.

"Hope" is the driving force behind nearly all supplements today.

While that might not sound like a big deal from a human perspective, it's the molecular equivalent of waking up one morning and realizing that your arm has gone missing. (talking about free radicals)

The healthiest and safest doses of vitamins are the ones naturally found in food.

This idea has become so ingrained in our culture that, much like occasional churchgoers, even those of us who aren't true believers still take a multivitamin "just in case".

Troops rely on this human-designed food in the field because they don't have access to anything else. But given that we're free to choose whatever we want at the grocery store, why do we?

We still don't know how to reverse engineer the perfect food. Nature is simply too complex. Indeed, it might well be an impossible goal - for how could we ever be confident that we weren't missing something?

The #1 contributors of calories to the American diet are "grain-based desserts" like cakes, cookies, pies, doughnuts, and cobblers.

What we eat may affect the expression of our genes.

That's perhaps the ultimate question to be asked about our relationship with vitamins, and I've come to believe that its answer lies in the very reason faith exists: it is a salve against uncertainty. Humans hate uncertainty. So we assign names to chemicals; we count calories and classify food types; we do whatever we can to maintain a sense of control over our bodies and the world. In the case of religion, we put our faith in gods. And in nutrition, we have vitamins.

Why not accept that we don't have all the answers - and then use what we do know to stack the odds in our favor?

Choose foods that are high in vitamins that nature - not humans - put there; chances are that they're nutritious in other ways as well. Before you buy an enriched or fortified product, stop and ask yourself, "Why has it been fortified? Would I buy it if it hadn't been?"

By encouraging the consumption of naturally nutrient-dense foods, it would also rectify a paradox in the American approach to nutrition: for as obsessed as we are with the idea of nutritional recommendations, we don't follow the ones that we already have.

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### **Rudnik says**

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### **C. says**

The subject of vitamins is one that you do not see being tackled that often nowadays, and thus one could leave from the same premise that I previously did, that all vitamins must be good for our health.

Brilliant pieces of information are being posted as we go along with the reading, such as the source of synthetic vitamin D, that humans cannot make their own vitamin C, and probably most notably being the fact that vitamins as dietary supplements are not required to be tested for safety or efficacy before being sold. The latter should raise quite a number of questions by now.

The second half of the book introduces an interesting term, phytochemicals. In short we are being informed about the vitamins and their synergy when eating whole foods. Substances are being shown to be working differently when they are together than they do when they are on their own. Researches are still underway, and you could probably understand why such a delicate matter is rather slow in showing new results as it is not in the interest of business.

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### **Erik Tanouye says**

I bought this on Amazon. I thought if it convinced me to stop taking vitamins, it might save me a lot of money in the long run.

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### **Monica Willyard says**

This book has given me a lot to consider. I thought I knew a lot about health and vitamins, and now I see there are some things I missed.

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### **Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says**

Vitamins are so simple -- take a multivitamin once a day and forget about it. If you're happy with that no-brainer regimen, then don't read *Vitamania*. Whether you swear by supplements or are a supplement skeptic, you are bound to learn a lot from this book.

*Vitamania* reminded me of Pandora's Lunchbox in its disarmingly conversational style while digging up all the dirt on processed foods. But don't get the idea that Catherine Price isn't keeping her eye on the story -- she has done the research, the interviews, the follow-ups, and you come away realizing that we know an awful lot about vitamins. It's we don't know (and what we think we know, but don't) that could be hurting us.

You may already know that the Food and Drug Administration is not responsible for certifying the safety of vitamins or supplements, which are neither food nor drug. There is no federal agency that tests the safety or effectiveness of vitamin supplements. Recent news stories reveal that many supplements are incorrectly labeled, containing fillers that are not listed on the bottle, and containing none of the advertised ingredients. While manufacturers are responsible for correctly labeling their products, they do not have to ensure the ingredients are effective or even safe. And they don't have to warn consumers that their products may interact with prescription and over-the-counter drugs to diminish the effect of the drug or to cause side effects.

We do know a lot about vitamins and Price has included a history of the discovery of many of the vitamins we know about and has included a handy chart in the appendix that lists the vitamins and their uses.

But here's what else we don't know or know only partially -- we know how much of each vitamin we need, roughly, we don't always know if a vitamin that occurs naturally in food acts the same way in our bodies if it is taken synthetically or in combination with other foods. Even vitamins in fresh food can differ widely in its absorption rate depending on whether the food is eaten raw or cooked or even if it's cooked with water or with oil.

*Vitamania* is packed with these kinds of questions and just as much that we do know. Price also has a lot of entertaining and informative encounters with people in the vitamin business. One of my favorites was when she visited the U.S. Army lab that develops MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). Let's just say that the soldiers who eat that stuff deserve a medal of some kind.

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## Owlseyes says

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/ar...>

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## Laura (Book Scrounger) says

When I first read the description for this book, I had mixed expectations. For some reason, the word "vitamin" caused red flags to go up in my mind, and interestingly enough, by the time I finished reading, the book actually helped me to establish a better understanding of \*why\* that word can have that effect on me and many others. For that alone, I would consider it a job well done, but I found this book full of many other fascinating explorations as well.

The author was smart to start with history, because by grounding this book in the past, she is able to present much more than just a run-down of scientific studies and facts, which would be pretty dry on their own. She is an excellent storyteller, humorous when appropriate to the narrative, and retains an eye for the big picture. Vitamins are tiny things - she explores them both on that level, and on a global, historical one.

I love reading about history, but I also find nutrition fascinating, so the combination of the two kept me picking this book up after I'd set it down. While this book is scientific, the author gives explanations and reminders at the right times - I don't think it would be too deep or confusing for anyone who's taken high-school-level biology and chemistry.

We're given stories of the individuals and discoveries that helped to shape our modern understanding of what vitamins are and what they do. These help to build the "pictures" of what the word "vitamin" means to us in modern times - pictures fed by stories of scientists from history, vitamin-deficiency diseases, the history of the FDA, synthetic vitamins and the fortification of food, the utter lack of regulation in the US supplement industry today and some of the politics involved, how food could possibly even affect our genetics, and the need to acknowledge just how much we still \*don't\* know about vitamins, food, and nutrition.

One of the things I appreciated the most about this book and author was the level-headed handling of the subject matter. To me, "vitamins," as they are portrayed in media reports and blog posts, tend to go hand-in-hand with alarmism, or big, drastic health claims. That's probably why I'm wary of them (in forms besides food, that is). But Catherine Price manages to side-step, and even counteract that sort of representation - she appears to be a thorough, nuanced journalist who's good at asking questions and not afraid of philosophical ones either.

This book was fascinating to me, not because it made bold, drastic, earth-shattering claims (indeed, its most applicable conclusion as far as nutrition goes is that whole foods are better, which is hardly new information) but because it thoroughly explored why it is that our idea of "vitamins" seems to be so wedded not only to the idea of "health" in general, but to disease prevention to the point of miracles. While counteracting this notion with evidence-based information, the author is not afraid to point out the limitations of our current knowledge, and use examples from history about the dangers of arrogance when it comes to figuring out just how food components work in our bodies.

She also gives us a lot to think about when it comes to how we react to health information, and how much faith we put in what we read about it.

From the concluding chapter:

"...we continue to accept the idea that anything that contains vitamins must be good, despite the fact that we viscerally know that marketers are using this assumption to manipulate us into buying their products. We don't ask where the synthetic vitamins in these foods come from, or why our food supply requires so much reverse engineering to begin with. Instead, we allow our capacity for rational thought to be hijacked by a word. And, despite the fact that more than half of us take vitamins as pills (and nearly all of us associate them with health), nearly \*none\* of us stop to wonder why--out of all of the thousands of chemicals in food--we revere these particular thirteen, why we regard them not just with appreciation, but with what often resembles religious faith... In the case of religion, we put our faith in gods. And in nutrition, we have vitamins."

(In compliance with FTC guidelines, I disclose that I received this book for free through GoodReads' First Reads. I was not required to write a positive review.)

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### **Greg Linster says**

This is an excellent book which explores the Western obsession with trying to reverse engineer food into pills. I'm willing to bet that you or someone you know currently takes a vitamin or supplement. Beware: snake oil sales are at an all-time high.

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### **Angelea says**

Anyone who takes, or even thinks about taking, any dietary supplement, whether a vitamin, mineral, herbal product, or anything else sold in the "vitamin" aisle, should read this book. The first half of the book is a fascinating telling of the history of the discovery of vitamins, deficiencies that occurred throughout recorded history (and still occur), and what we still don't understand about these compounds despite all the scientific advances of today.

The second half of the book very succinctly runs through the history of the laws, or lack thereof, which govern the dietary supplement industry and the comparisons between it and the drug industry. The aura of safety around dietary supplements is likely only a result of some substances having absolutely no effect whatsoever or the absence of any meaningful studies which have collected or analyzed data regarding safety and efficacy, a standard the pharmaceutical industry is held to in the utmost.

All of this is told in a very easy-to-read and entertaining fashion. Great book!

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### **Marta Kostka says**

Pi?teczka cho?by za ten cytat „Humans hate the unknown. We chafe against it; it makes us feel powerless and paralyzed. So we assign names to chemicals; we count calories and classify food types; we look for advice on food labels and in the news; we do whatever we can to maintain a sense of control over our bodies and the world. In a high-stakes situation like health, where explanations often are incomplete and guarantees

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are impossible, we soothe our discomfort by finding something to believe in, something that will make us feel safe. In the case of religion, we put our faith in gods. And in nutrition, we have vitamins.”

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### **Tatiana Kim says**

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### **Ann Welton says**

First, I received an ARC copy of this e-book for my enjoyment and review from First-To-Read(Penguin Random House).

Being a health-care professional (RN, Nurse Practitioner) and long-distance runner, I found this title intriguing, and looked forward to this author's experience and opinion.

First and foremost – I found this author to be very credible not only with her credentials as a nutritionist but also as a Type I diabetic early in life, making her very aware of her daily intakes of food/nutrition just to maintain life.

What all started as an innocent venture into a health food store in search of something to help her rash of unknown cause/cure, the author was launched into a journey of vitamin supplement regulations. A very detailed history of vitamins and their growth in the American food culture ensues, along with discussions of why we are fine with vitamin pill supplements, no matter what their composition. This begins the history of how vitamins have been and continue to be painfully marketed to the consumer throughout history.

As the author so eloquently discussed, “are we okay with the fact that dietary supplements are not required to be tested for safety or efficacy before being sold?” Some are even being spiked with pharmaceutical drugs, which we are unaware of. “Does it make sense to assume that everything ‘natural’ is harmless, regardless of dose?” Our supermarket shelves are packed with energy-enhanced sports drinks and vitamin-fortified snacks, and do we as consumers really need all this to have a healthier, longer life? Can we easily exist on good food to provide vitamins alone, without pill supplements? This entire book fascinated me from beginning to end – job so very well done by the author. How little we are told, as consumers, so depend on authors like Catherine Price to keep us informed and thinking.

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### **Brad says**

A well-written treatise on what exactly vitamins are (no, you don't know already). I'm no history buff, but even the historical pieces were well done (especially the maddening rush to figure out vitamin deficiency diseases like rickets and beriberi). Entertaining as well as informative, give this one a try.

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