

Can vitamin injections help you heal after surgical procedures?

- By Sharon Labi
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Medication, the sharp needles of hypodermic syringes pushed into a pile of pills, tablets and capsules. *Source:* The Sunday Telegraph

A FACELIFT or nose job usually comes with the obligatory fortnight in isolation, hiding the bruising and swelling until you're ready to show off your new look.

But a handful of cosmetic surgeons claim that popping vitamins before surgery, and an intravenous (IV) shot immediately afterwards, can significantly cut recovery time.

A few private clinics and at least one Sydney surgeon are offering IV vitamin therapy to reduce recovery time by a third.

While anecdotal evidence is not yet backed up by science, patients appear happy to fork out up to \$500 extra for the infusion.

Sydney cosmetic surgeon Dr Michael Zacharia asks patients to take zinc and a multivitamin and gives them resveratrol and bromelain in the week leading up to surgery.

Resveratrol, derived from Japanese knotweed, and bromelain, a mix of enzymes found in the juice and stems of pineapple, are touted as natural anti-inflammatories.

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But Dr Zacharia says the key is the drip given to the patient immediately after surgery, which contains vitamin C, zinc, B-complex and glutathione.

“[The vitamins] have more of a beneficial effect after surgery, after the inflammatory process has started, so I don’t give them [the IV injection] before surgery. When they go into recovery, we put up the drip,” Dr Zacharia says.

“Before, it may have taken two to three weeks for the swelling to settle down, and it’s now taking about a week.

The swelling and bruising seems to be less for those patients who have the vitamins, but we have no way of measuring it and it is anecdotal.”

The traditionally conservative medical profession is somewhat sceptical. Dr Brian Morton, Australian Medical Association NSW president, says there would be a case for vitamin therapy if a patient was malnourished.

Doctors want to see evidence-based studies to show that the IV vitamins actually work.

“Most wisdom would be that if you’ve been sick for some time and you’re elderly, then good nutrition afterwards, and possibly vitamin supplementation, would be a good idea, but I’m not sure there’s hard evidence [to support the case for vitamin therapy],” Dr Morton says.

He cites a case a few years ago of three women who were diagnosed with hepatitis C after receiving vitamin or mineral injections by a doctor who was found to have poor infection controls at his clinic.

“One tends to forget there are some general issues with procedures that aren’t always ‘necessary’,” Dr Morton says.

“There’s a risk benefit analysis for everything. There’s a risk you might get infection, you might unmask something or get bleeding.

That’s why the medical profession is usually amazingly conservative. We want to see proof that [vitamin therapy] is evidence-based and that it is doing good and not harm.”

Show me the evidence

The National Institute of Complementary Medicine, set up two years ago with federal and state government funding, recently announced a series of grants to research how complementary therapies can work with conventional medicine.

Suzanne Pierce, the institute’s general manager, says more and more doctors are open to complementary medicine and that GP clinics are increasingly adopting an integrative approach to their practices.

But she acknowledges that if complementary medicines such as vitamin therapy are going to have real health impacts, everybody wants to see the hard evidence.

She hopes that six studies currently underway, which include examining fish oil, ginseng, ginkgo biloba, coenzyme Q10 and acupuncture, and how they react with common conditions such as heart disease, breast cancer and infertility, will help sway conservative minds.

Another vitamin devotee is Dr Gabrielle Caswell, president of the Cosmetic Physicians Society of Australasia. She says vitamins can be beneficial before and after surgery.

“The healthier a person is going into an operation, the quicker they’ll heal and recover, whether it’s heart bypass surgery or breast augmentation,” she says. “It’s not a bad strategy.

“There is merit in getting bodies into peak condition [because] you have to recover from an intentionally inflicted wound.”

Dr Caswell gives her patients oral vitamins including fish oil, zinc, magnesium, evening primrose oil and sugarless vitamin C and B-group vitamins.

“Vitamin C helps to make stronger collagen; zinc and magnesium result in better cellular responses; omega-3 and 6 and evening primrose oil help make the cell wall more competent, and also help deal with inflammation,” she says.

Dr Caswell puts her patients on a vitamin plan a week or two before surgery and for up to six months afterwards.

Melbourne doctor John Piesse injects his patients with vitamins before and after surgery, as well as to help fight chronic conditions and fatigue, and to boost the immune system.

He says he will usually add vitamin B-complex, vitamin B6, magnesium and trace elements to the vitamin C solution to boost the body's ability to deal with the illness or surgery and to prevent the vitamin C from irritating the vein.

Faster recovery

Doctors at the Vie Institute, a cosmetic surgery practice on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, also use IV vitamin therapy following cosmetic surgery.

One patient, who wishes to remain anonymous, had an IV drip after a facelift and says she was out and about much faster than a friend who had similar surgery and no vitamin therapy.

"With me, there was no bruising at all," says the 50-year-old hairdresser. "I had swelling for a couple of days. Within one week I was back at work, but I could have gone back earlier.

"[The vitamin therapy] was given during recovery. After I woke up, it was all done and dusted. The next morning I felt amazing."

The drip costs an extra \$300, but she says it was a small price to pay.

"I really do think it cut the recovery time. I have some little scars in front of my ears but nobody knows. They say my hair is looking great or whatever, but they don't know I've had [my face] done."

Excessive vitamin use can have side effects, but surgeons say a patient is unlikely to overdose when taking vitamins for short periods before and after surgery.

Vitamin glossary

Resveratrol: A phytoalexin produced naturally by several plants that exhibits antioxidant and anti-inflammatory abilities.

Bromelain: An enzyme found in the fruit and stems of pineapples that is used as a natural anti-inflammatory.

Vitamin C: A vitamin found in fresh fruits and vegetables that is involved in a large number of biological processes. It is used to create collagen in the body, strengthens skin, joints and bones and helps to heal wounds.

B-complex: A collection of water-soluble vitamins needed in very small amounts for metabolic processes. They are essential for many processes in the body, including cell reproduction.

Fish oil: Comes from oily fish and contains omega-3 fatty acids, which help reduce inflammation in the body.

Zinc: A mineral needed for a healthy immune system, cell reproduction, tissue growth and repair.

Glutathione: A tripeptide also known as GSH, it is found in every cell of the body and helps repair DNA. It's an antioxidant that helps regulate other vitamins such as C and E.

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