Attitude and perception of independent elderly towards dietary supplements

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INTRODUCTION: Whilst studies have shown that elderly people have an increased risk for nutritional deficiencies, dietary supplements are used by merely 22% of the Dutch elderly (aged > 50).

OBJECTIVE: To study attitude and perception of independently living elderly towards dietary supplements.

METHODS: A qualitative study, focus group discussions (FGD), was conducted in 3 different community centers. Included were people aged ≥ 50 with a maximum of 2 (>50-64) or 3 (≥65) common age related chronic diseases, living independently in the city of Groningen, able to do their own shopping, randomly selected on using or not using dietary supplements. FGD consisted of 6-8 participants and took place in a relaxed comfortable setting. Saturation was reached after 6 FGD (n = 38). The FGD were audio-taped and transcribed. Labeling followed the steps of open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Two versions of open coding and axial coding were compared to ensure validity and reliability. The coded data were organized into a framework based on the ASE-behavior determinants model.

RESULTS: Elderly used dietary supplements if they considered their daily diet to be insufficient. Additional considerations for use were health complaints, the winter season and aging. Some elderly perceived dietary supplements to positively influence their wellbeing. However, most found it difficult to actually impute the use of dietary supplements to their wellbeing. The majority of elderly did not have a pronounced positive or negative attitude. General attitude towards dietary supplements was influenced by experienced effects; suggestion of a positive effect played some role. The perception of eating a healthy and varied diet was a consideration for non using dietary supplements. Also polypharmacy, taste of supplements, annoying commercials, cost and tablet size. Lack of perceived objective information about the usefulness of dietary supplements caused non-users to be skeptical. Advice of the general practitioner of significant others was leading in the decision whether of not to use dietary supplements.

CONCLUSION: Elderly need objective information to decide whether or not to use dietary supplements. This should be based on screening for dietary intake by professionals in nutrition or dietetics. Manufacturers of dietary supplements should focus on improving taste and size. They should be aware that some commercials may annoy people and thus be counter productive. Because general practitioners are leading in the decision whether or not to use dietary supplements they should refer elderly to health care professionals specialized in nutrition or dietetics for nutritional assessment and advice.

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