

What's the Psychology Behind Using Dietary Supplements?

In this episode of From Bench to Bedside and Beyond, Dr. Jonathan Bricker explains why we choose the “quick fix” over tried-and-true cancer prevention methods. [VIDEO]

April 1, 2026 By Fred Hutch News Service and Diane Mapes

Fred Hutch Cancer Center psychologist and public health researcher [Jonathan Bricker, PhD](#), talks about why people readily embrace dietary supplements — which are unregulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, or FDA, and require no safety or scientific studies — but at the same time, turn away from science-based cancer prevention like the HPV vaccine.

“It’s not about ignorance or misinformation,” said Bricker, who holds the Endowed Chair in Cancer Prevention. “It’s about a basic human desire to avoid discomfort and to have control.”

Watch the video above or [on YouTube](#).

The full transcript is below.

Key takeaways:

- Many people take supplements in order to improve health and avoid cancer.
- But large clinical trials led by Fred Hutch have found some supplements actually promote, not prevent, cancer.
- At the same time, vaccine hesitancy is increasing — even for safe, long-studied vaccines that actually prevent cancer.
- What’s the psychology behind our willingness to embrace “quick fixes” like supplements and peptides even when there’s little science behind their efficacy, but turn away from tried-and-

true cancer prevention breakthroughs like the HPV vaccine?

- It's about a "basic human desire to avoid discomfort and to have control," according to Bricker.
- Dietary supplements "aren't just biological interventions, they're psychological interventions," he said, because they promise immediate action and give us agency.
- Public health messaging tends to take a rational approach. This triggers fear, which then drives people toward the "quick biomedical fix." It creates a "psychological feedback loop."

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Tune in for more episodes of [From Bench to Bedside and Beyond](#). And if you're interested in being a guest, please reach out to Diane Mapes at dmapes@fredhutch.org or to brochman@fredhutch.org.

Read more about Fred Hutch's research on dietary supplements and why it's crucial for patients going through cancer treatment to share with their care team if they're taking any kind of supplements (some can interfere with treatment!).

Read the Fred Hutch News story:

[Supplements don't prevent cancer, studies show](#)

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Transcript:

Diane Mapes (00:01)

Hi, I'm Diane Mapes with Fred Hutch News. I recently wrote about dietary supplements and how studies, many of them done at Fred Hutch, have shown they're not necessarily good for cancer prevention and in some cases can even promote cancer.

It made me curious as to why we tend to reach for pills or powders or peptides, this new trend of biohacking, but we turn away from more science-based interventions like vaccines. I turned to Dr. Jonathan Bricker, a psychologist who specializes in cancer prevention, to get some answers.

Jonathan Bricker (00:36)

I don't think the appeal of peptides over vaccines is about ignorance or misinformation at all. I think it's about a basic human desire to avoid discomfort and to have control. Peptides and

supplements serve the same function. They are control-driven behaviors that help people reduce uncertainty and they reduce discomfort. And in the long run, they're unfortunately not helping people because there's no evidence that they work.

Jonathan Bricker (01:19)

And so let me unpack what I mean by that. We work really hard as humans to avoid and control. We may feel anxious about our age or any declines in our functioning. We may be afraid of death, afraid of illness. We may feel uncertain about the future. And when you think about things like cancer risk or smoking or weight, they are going to evoke discomfort, anxiety, a sense of loss of control, of vulnerability. And these are precisely the experiences that humans want to escape. We don't want to have those things.

Jonathan Bricker (02:08)

And so if you think of peptides as a control strategy, so peptides function as a way to reduce internal distress. They're not just biological interventions. They're psychological interventions. Why? Because they promise precision. They're targeted mechanisms. They promise agency. I'm doing something very sophisticated here. And they give us immediate action. I don't have to wait years to see benefit.

Jonathan Bricker (02:40)

And so from that perspective, peptides are all about experiential avoidance. If I optimize my biology, I don't have to sit with the fear of death or disease. I don't have to sit with the fear of cancer. And there is a certain mental connection we make that if we have advanced medical technology, even if there's no science in it or the flimsiest science, that that's health. So that's a belief we've come to hold because health is something I can engineer.

Jonathan Bricker (03:13)

These sort of science-based interventions, like vaccines, they require a willingness to experience fear. And they require a letting go of the illusion of perfect control. And so if you take this purely rational approach, which is what a lot of public health messaging does, you're going to fail, and they are failing, because you're getting the opposite of what you're going after. And so you get this cycle where prevention messaging evokes fear, fear triggers control, and control drives people toward the fix, the biomedical fix. And now all this great work in prevention is completely devalued, and you get this psychological feedback loop.

Jonathan Bricker (04:06)

So that's what I see is why these quick fixes have persisted forever, will persist forever, because they provide us the ability to avoid discomfort in a world where the alternative just makes us more uncomfortable.

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