

# SCIENCE NEWS®

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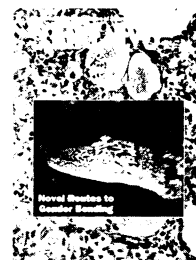
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Cover: Alligators at Florida's Lake Apopka have been instrumental in uncovering why environmental estrogens don't fully explain the impaired fertility and reproductive maturation caused by some common pollutants. (Inset photo: Howard K. Suzuki; background photo: John Matter)



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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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## Letters

### Weighing in on profit motive

Richard Averett refers to "our profit-driven medical industry" (Letters, SN: 5/6/95, p.282). Thanks for providing my one good laugh (or was it snort?) of the day.

Could he be thinking that the alternative medicine and health food industries are not profit-driven?

Hal Hellman  
Leonia, N.J.

### Vitamin E seesaw

Nothing in "Vitamin E: A cancer warning" (SN: 4/29/95, p.271) even remotely supports the statement that vitamin E may "preferentially protect [a latent cancer]—even aid its spread."

The finding that breast cancer patients with aggressive tumors have higher vitamin E and lower free radical by-products is very provoking and may, as Gerber suggests, reflect "an adaptive response of the cancer cells."

But how on earth could anyone leap from this to stating that taking antioxidant supplements "might facilitate this advantage"? Had any of the 750 women in the studies taken supplemental vitamin E?

Glorious food for future cancer research, maybe, but vitamin E "aid[s] its spread"? C'mon.

To make these statements is to reinforce the illusion that science only exists to jerk us around. The week before, you told readers that not only physicians, but 100 percent of scientists at a conference are taking antioxidants themselves ("Power foods," SN: 4/22/95, p.248).

Elaine P. Gordon  
Norfolk, Va.

To help understand their findings, Gerber says, her research team reviewed the scientific literature. They turned up a report by Lars-Eric Holm of the Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm and his coworkers, who found that among breast cancer patients, treatment failures were

higher for women taking vitamin E supplements than for women not taking them—and the failure rate increased with dose. A second study showed that fish oil retards the growth of tumors in nude mice, a benefit that disappeared when the researchers gave the animals antioxidant vitamins.

Gerber's team then conducted its own experiments in animals that had received breast cancer transplants. Among mice administered vitamin E, she told SCIENCE NEWS, "the more we gave them, the bigger their tumors grew."

Gerber assumed that since vitamin E supplementation is rare in France in general, it was also unusual among the women studied.

Taken together with Gerber's new human data, concludes Victor Herbert, director of nutrition at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and a chairman of the panel at which she presented her findings, "[Gerber's team] showed that the vitamin E... promoted cancer growth and spread."

As for the discrepancy between the findings reported in the two articles, it is, as you say, "food for future cancer research." — J. Raloff